

# **Toward a Chewa Ecotheology with Special Reference to the thought of Ernst M. Conradie**

**By**

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## **DEDICATION**

This study is dedicated to my beloved wife Grace Makiyi Chitheka as well as to my children Legnat, Dorothy, Enock and Esther, who all have enthusiastically supported my studies towards this degree.

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## ABSTRACT

This study concerns the possibility of the Nkhoma Synod C.C.A.P. formulating its own ecotheological views as a way toward motivating its members to participate in addressing the ecological crisis in the Malawi.

First the major issues in the study are introduced, namely what the ecological crisis is and what its causes and consequences are, globally as well as in Malawi. The other issue is whether the Nkhoma Synod may learn from existing ecotheological reflections, specifically those of Ernst M. Conradie and whether, in the process, elements of African culture (specifically that of the Chewa, who form the majority of the constituents of the Synod) that resonate with Conradie's work may be taken into account to make the Synod's ecological message more understandable and effective among its members.

With regard to the causes of the ecological crisis, natural causes are identified, but it is shown that the current crisis is particularly the result of human action. Malawi, a very poor country, is shown to already be negatively affected by the crisis in different ways and on almost all levels of society. The reflection on the ecotheological thought of Ernst Conradie takes as point of departure his understanding of the term "church" as a locus of ecotheological reflection and action. Conradie's theological understanding of the causes and consequences of the ecological crisis is explained and special attention is given to the most recent emphasis in his work, namely his understanding of the culture of consumerism as the root cause of the ecological crisis and what the theological implications and solutions to this may be.

With a view to ascertain what Chewa culture may contribute to efforts by the Nkhoma Synod to formulate ecotheological principles for its members, the meaning and characteristics of culture are discussed as well as the important issue of what the relationship between it (culture) and theology/faith may be. Different elements of Chewa culture are then identified and explained, especially ecological sensitive elements in it. Finally these elements are brought into conversation with Conradie's thought in an attempt to find ways in which the ecological sensitivities in Chewa culture may strengthen efforts by the Synod to motivate its members towards ecological responsibility and action on the basis of their faith.

**KEY TERMS:** Ecotheology, ecological crisis, C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod, Ernst M. Conradie, Malawi, Chewa culture.

## ABSTRAK

Die vraag wat staan teen die agtergrond van hierdie studie is die wenslikheid en moontlikheid al dan nie van die formulering van eie ekoteologiese insigte deur die Nkhoma Sinode C.C.A.P. in Malawi in die lig van die ekologiese krisis wêreldwyd en in Malawi.

Die kwessie wat eerste bespreek word is wat die ekologiese krisis is en wat die oorsake en gevolge daarvan is. 'n Ander kwessie is of die Nkhoma Sinode kan leer by bestaande ekoteologiese sienings, spesifiek dié van Ernst M. Conradie en of dit, in die proses, elemente van Afrika-kultuur (spesifiek dié van die Chewa, wat die meerderheid van die Sinode se lede uitmaak) wat resoneer met Conradie se insigte in ag kan neem ten eiende 'n eie effektiewe en verstaanbare ekologiese boodskap te formuleer. Met betrekking tot die oorsake van die ekologiese krisis, word beide natuurlike en mensgemaakte oorsake uitgewys. Malawi, 'n baie arm land, word reeds negatief geraak deur die krisis op verskillende wyses en op bykans alle vlakke van die samelewing.

Die bespreking van die ekoteologiese insigte van Conradie neem as vertrekpunt sy verstaan van die term “kerk” as locus van ekoteologiese refleksie en aksie. Conradie se verstaan van die teologiese oorsake en gevolge van die ekologiese krisis word verduidelik en aandag word veral gegee aan die mees onlangse klem in sy werk, naamlik sy verstaan van verbruikerskultuur as die kernoorzaak van die ekologiese krisis en wat die teologiese implikasies daarvan mag wees.

Ten einde vas te stel hoe Chewa-kultuur mag bydra tot die Nkhoma Sinode se pogings om 'n eie ekoteologie te formuleer, word die betekenis en eienskappe van kultuur bespreek asook die belangrike kwessie van die verhouding tussen kultuur en teologie/geloof. Verskillende elemente in Chewa-kultuur word dan geïdentifiseer, veral mbt die ekologies-sensitiewe aard daarvan. Uiteindelik word hierdie elemente in gesprek gebring met Conradie se insigte in 'n poging om maniere te vind waarin die ekologies-sensitiewe elemente in Chewa-kultuur mag bydra tot die pogings van die Nkhoma Sinode om die lede daarvan te lei tot groter ekologiese verantwoordelikheid en aksie gegrond op hul geloof.

**SLEUTELTERME:** Ekologie, ekologiese krisis, C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Sinode, Ernst M. Conradie, Malawi, Chewa-kultuur.

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# CHAPTER ONE

## INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

### 1.1 Background to, motivation for and objectives of the study

Climate change<sup>1</sup> is one of the greatest threats that have ever confronted humanity. These are changes experienced in weather patterns on a global scale, including changes in temperature (so-called global warming), and the timing of seasons and changes in rainfall.<sup>2</sup> Other consequences of global warming include increased surface temperatures; melting of the polar ice caps and a resultant rise in sea levels; increases the prevalence and in intensity of extreme weather phenomena such as heat waves, tornadoes, hurricanes, and heavy rainfall, longer and more severe droughts; the expansion of deserts; decreased biodiversity and the extinction of species due to habitat destruction. In terms of human well-being, global warming leads, among other things, to a drop in agricultural production (with all its implications for nutrition and food security); the spread of vector-borne diseases because of an increased range of insects; the acidification of oceans creating drops in fishing yields. One unfortunate fact regarding climate change and the ecological crisis is also that its most severe impact will be on developing nations.

Malawi has not been immune to the negative consequences of climate change and the ecological crisis. Over the past decades it has experienced, for example, an increase of prolonged seasonal droughts, intense rainfall in some places and river line floods and flash floods in others (cf. Botolo and Ntupanyama, 2011). One simple but practical example of the impact of the global ecological crisis in Malawi, is that women and girls in rural areas already have to travel much further every day to collect firewood and to fetch water, while the only water available is

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1 *Ecolife* describes “climate change”, sometimes referred to as “global warming”, as the term used to refer to long-term changes experienced in weather patterns on a global scale (Ecolife, 2014). This includes changes in temperature, the timing of seasons and rainfall, resulting in global warming and slow but measurable increase in the earth’s temperature. Although climate change is only one aspect of the global ecological crisis, it remains a very important element and the one most-commonly referred to by people in general. In more scientific (climatological) terms, climate change is the result of human activities that have resulted in an increased concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere, including carbon dioxide, water vapour and methane gas. According to Burroughs (2010:11), global warming at its simplest level relates to the radiative balance of the earth: over time the amount of solar radiation absorbed by the atmosphere and the earth’s surface is equal to the amount of heat radiation emitted by the earth to space. However, global warming has the effect of retaining some solar energy in the climate system.

sometimes polluted and unsafe for human consumption. As elsewhere these changes have impacted on food security, the availability of energy resources and sustained livelihoods – especially the livelihoods of rural Malawian communities. Malawian agricultural, energy, fisheries, forestry, human health, water, and wildlife sectors all have already been adversely affected by climate change.

This study takes as point of departure that churches in Malawi, and for the purposes of this study, the C.C.A.P Nkhoma Synod in particular, may play a potentially significant role in changing perceptions of and motivation toward action to curbing the causes and the impact of the environmental crisis in Malawi. For this, however, the church needs to understand the phenomenon and extent of the crises and, being a Christian church, it needs to reflect on it from a theological perspective, specifically from what has become known as an *ecothological* perspective<sup>3</sup>.

The *personal motivation* behind this study has its origins in my attendance of an in-service training course for ministers at Zomba Ecumenical Theological College in Malawi, in 2000. Bishop Tengatenga (1992) of the Anglican Church in Malawi in a guest lecture spoke on the relationship between the church and environment based on Scripture. What was both surprising and very worrying to me was that I realised that this was the first time I had ever heard this being referred to a theological lecture, despite the fact that I had four years' of theological training (1984-1988) and that I had been attending theological seminars in Malawi since then. My realisation confronted me with the question of why (up to that time) there has been such an apparent silence on environmental issues in the C.C.A.P Nkhoma Synod's minutes, catechism, in its official mouthpiece the *Kuunika Magazine* and in its institutions of theological training. As I came to realise once conscious of this issue, reference to it was also absent from almost all sermons delivered across the spectrum of the Synod's congregations.

Moving outside my immediate context, I was part of Malawi Council of Churches (MCC) delegation that attended the All Africa Council of Churches (AACC) General Assembly in Maputo in August 2008. There I was further motivated by the addresses and the availability of

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3 As the Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto (Church of Sweden, 2008:26-27) explains, humans are given tools such as reason, insight and decisiveness to create, sustain and develop their environment for their own sakes. However, they also live in a close relationship with the universe, oceans, forests, deserts, animals and other human beings. This relational understanding is also a religious conviction and should encourage humanity and churches to focus on the common good of *all* of the earth.

literature on offer by ecological activist organizations attending the assembly. My experiences in my home country, coupled especially with the presentation by the Southern African Faith Communities' Environment Institute (<http://safcei.org/>) at the Maputo AACC General Assembly, convinced me of the need for theological reflection on the issue of environmental care within my own denomination.

My interest in ecotheology was also informed from a different perspective, namely that of my own cultural heritage, that of being *Chewa*.<sup>4</sup> I was confronted by the question of whether elements of my Chewa heritage that reveals something of an ecological sensitivity may be relevant to my ecotheological faith convictions. Furthermore, in the absence of any clear ecotheology in the Nkhoma Synod, and the members of the latter being predominantly Chewa, I was also wondering whether Chewa cultural values may contribute to future efforts of in the Nkhoma Synod toward sensitizing its members to the ecological crisis and in perhaps formulating its own ecotheology.

Finally, in reflecting on the apparent lack of a clear ecotheology in my own denomination, and reading up on the topic, I became acquainted with the work of South African theologian Ernst Conradie. In Conradie I found a theologian with a deep knowledge of and a written record on ecotheological topics. Widely respected and acquainted with the African context and existing views on ecotheology on the continent, I became convinced that Conradie may offer excellent insights into any study aimed at understanding ecotheology in Africa.

## 1.2. Primary and Secondary Research Questions

Given the above background and motivation, the following is the primary research question investigated in this study:

*With reference to the ecotheological thought of Ernst Conradie, do the challenges of the global ecological crisis, especially as it manifests itself in Malawi, imply any ecological responsibilities for the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod and how may the formulation of an own ecotheology within the Synod resonate and thus be supported by cultural perspectives, values and practices of the Chewa culture?*

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<sup>4</sup> The Chewa, one of the Bantu peoples, live in central Malawi. They are also found in parts of Zambia and Mozambique. In Malawi, however, they form the largest tribal grouping, constituting 58% of the country's inhabitants (cf. *Chewa and other Maravi Groups*, 2014). A detailed discussion on the Chewa and its culture will be given in Chapter Four of this study.

In order to answer the above primary research question, the following secondary research questions will be discussed:

1. What is meant by the phrase “the ecological/environmental crisis”; what are the different elements and causes of this crisis and how and to what extent does it manifest and impact Malawi?
2. What is understood under the term “ecothology”; what can be described as “Ernst M. Conradie’s ecotheology” and what are the specific emphases in the latter?
3. In what ways may cultural values and practices inform (eco-)theology?
4. Does an ecotheology exist within the C.C.P.A. Nkhoma Synod and if not, what elements of Chewa culture resonates with the ecotheological sensitivities of Ernst Conradie’s ecotheology that may strengthen the impact of a Nkhoma Synod ecotheology?

### **1.3. Research Hypothesis**

This study is based on the hypothesis that a proper understanding and use of ecotheological insights on consumerism in works of Ernst M. Conradie, as informed by elements of traditional Chewa culture, will equip and empower the Nkhoma Synod C.C.A.P., its pastors and members with environmental messages that will encourage them to address a looming ecological crisis in Malawi.

### **1.4. Research Design and Methodology**

This research took the form of a literature research. Published and non-published materials were consulted, amongst others at Josophat Mwale Theological Institute (Malawi), Zomba Theological College (Malawi), Chancellor College (Malawi), Nkhoma Synod church archives and Stellenbosch University. Theological sources that were investigated were in particular, but not exclusively, those of Ernst Conradie. Works on Chewa culture, from theological, anthropological and historical perspectives were also accessed. Finally, data were also accessed from the Nkhoma Synod C.C.A.P.’s reports, minutes, and its church magazine.

### **1.5 Aims and Limitations of the Study**

This study aims to do the following:

1. To give an overview of the meaning of the phrase “ecological crisis” with reference to its history, causes, manifestations and extent in general, but also specifically in Malawi.
2. To clarify the meaning of the term and theological sub-discipline of “ecothology” and, with reference to the work of Ernst M. Conradie, to identify the most important theological principles within the latter’s ecotheological thought.
3. To understand, what is meant by the phenomenon of “culture”, including the concept of “consumer culture” and, from a theological perspective, what the relationship between theology and culture may be.
4. To identify elements of Chewa culture (including elements of traditional belief and worldview) that reflect an environmental sensitivity and which may have bearing on the threat or reality of consumer culture among (Chewa) Malawians.
5. To discern to what extent traditional Chewa cultural values and practices resonate with Christian ecotheological principles en route to the formulation and successful operationalisation of a ecotheology/ecotheologies within the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod.

In ecotheological terms, the focus of the study is the work of Ernst Conradie and special attention will be given to his most recent emphasis on consumerism as a root cause of the contemporary ecological crisis. However, the work of other theologians and other social scientists will also be taken into account, especially with regard to the issue of culture and Chewa culture and its relationship to faith/theology. The scope of this study is thus limited to the culture of a very specific cultural group, namely the Chewa of Malawi as representative of the majority of the members of the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod. The latter will also be the focus of existence or lack of environmental programs and ecotheological reflections and perceptions in Malawi. *Finally, within the scope of this Master’s study the aim is not to offer a proposal for an ecotheology for the Nkhoma Synod, but only to point toward some specific elements that are deemed useful or necessary for any future formulation of such an ecotheology/-ies.*

## **1.6 Preliminary Literature Review – Key Conversation Partners**

A large body of literature on the global ecological crisis has been produced over the past 50 to 60 years from all corners of the world. The crisis has also been reflected upon from divergent



disciplines from natural science to economics to education, from the arts to social work.<sup>56</sup> In the wake of scientific proof of climate change, environmentalists have and do endeavor to make the world population aware of the reality, extent and causes of this crisis. Some scholars have also been suggesting ways to governments, communities and individuals to lessen their negative impact – sometimes called their “carbon footprint” – on the environment (cf., e.g., Boyle and Ardill, 1989).<sup>7</sup> Very systematic yearly reports are also, for example, given by The Worldwatch Institute (2010 and 2011) to keep the ongoing successes and failures of environmental action on the world agenda.

More and more world bodies have also come on board in the efforts to curb ecological destruction and climate change. Conferences and consultations over the past decades were often inspired by United Nations.<sup>8</sup> In this process, religions and religious bodies at different levels have also joined the discourse. This led to the production of scores of statements, declarations and studies on the ecological crisis by churches or church bodies. Major international Christian

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5 For example, from the perspective of the natural sciences especially in climatology, agricultural science, biology and studies in biodiversity. Some of the insights from these disciplines will be referred to in Chapter Two of this study. However, also in the humanities the ecological crisis has been a serious topic of discussion. While ecological anthropologist Eugene Anderson (2010:99), for example, looks at the ecological crisis from the perspective of constituting the most important single cause of both social and environmental injustice that casues the billion people at the bottom of the world’s socioeconomic scale suffer from multiple problems, philosopher Roger Gottlieb (2010:355, 357) refers to the ecological crisis as a major threat to world peace (i.e., harming the atmosphere and environment due to the lack of respect for nature, by the plundering on natural resources, the progressive decline in the quality of life and increased competition for scarce natural resources). From a historical perspective, scholars such as Stephen Mosley (2011) have documented human history with reference to how humanity has been modifying its environment in order to survive, but that this also happened at a terrible cost.

6 Naturally, there are different causes of climate change. Scientists, for example, Burroughs (2010:151-153), asserts that the principal elements of the global climate, the atmosphere-ocean interactions, ocean volcano eruptions, sunspots and solar activity, tidal forces, orbital variations, continental drift and changes in atmospheric composition are some of the causes of climate change. According to Mugambi (2001:8), from a theological perspective says that atmosphere is a global common, it envelopes the earth, nurturing and protecting all life,. As such it is to be shared by and with everyone, today and in the future.

7 Stewart Boyle and John Ardill (1989:14) comment that the atmosphere performs three roles which are vital to life on earth and to the story of climate change: (1) It keeps the Earth warm, (2) It takes part in constant exchange of chemical elements and compounds with the seas, the soil and the living matter of the Earth, (3) It generates our weather. All three functions are linked to one another and to chemical and biological processes taking place on land and in the seas. By changing the atmosphere we are throwing all these interrelated activities out of balance.

8 The most famous probably being the so-called UN-initiated Conferences of the Parties (COP) within the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (NCDRM/COP/UNFCCC). For a summary of this process, see UNFCCC, n.d.

religious bodies such as the World Council of Churches (WCC),<sup>9</sup> the World Communion of Reformed Churches (see, for example the latter's well-known "Accra Confession"<sup>10</sup>) and the All Africa Conference of Churches (AAC) have joined the discussions. Closer to home environmental issues have also been on the agenda of the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (FOCCISA) and on that of the South African Council of Churches (SACC) (see, for example the latter's *Climate Change – A Challenge to the Churches in South Africa*, from 2011) and the so-called *Oikos Journey* (2006).<sup>12</sup> The SACC is only one example of many where national faith communities have voiced their concern about climate change, but this has been done even by local faith communities, for example the statement by the Toronto United Church of Canada (1992). Religious concern over the ecological crisis is also not only on the agenda of Christianity, but also on those of other religions<sup>13</sup> and the environmental crisis has even brought

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9 Paul Santmire (2004), for example, reported on the WCC calls for a just, participatory, sustainable society at its 7<sup>th</sup> General Assembly in Canberra (1991) under the theme of "Justice, Peace and the Integrity of Creation". The WCC has also issued other documents like "Accelerated Climate Change: Signs of Peril, Test of Faith" (1993); "Alternative Globalization Addressing People and Earth (AGAPE)" (2005) and most recently the "Statement on eco-justice and ecological debt" (2009). The All Africa Conference of Churches (AACC) made statements on the environment at the Ecumenical Consultation on Climate Change (Africa) (June 2008) and the declaration of the Fellowship of Christian Councils in Southern Africa (FOCCISA) for example commented on "ecological debt and climate change" in July 2009.

10 The "Accra Confession" was adopted by delegates of the World Reformed Churches (WARC) 24<sup>th</sup> General Council in Accra, Ghana (2004), based on the theological conviction that economic and environmental injustices in today's global economy requires the Reformed family of churches worldwide to respond to environmental issues as a matter of faith in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

11 In this document, the South African Council of Churches clearly states that climate change poses not merely a technological, an economical or a political challenge, but also a cultural, moral and, indeed, a spiritual problem that lies not merely in the ecosystem but also in the human heart, attitudes, orientations, aspirations, priorities, habits, and practices from institutions (SACC, 2009:3-7).

12 "*Oikos*" is the Greek word for a household. Both economy and ecology are derived from this word. Economy is about the management of resources in the household of human beings and ecology is about relations and patterns in the household of nature. The document, issued by a group of Christian denominations in South Africa, insists quite rightly, that economy and ecology cannot be separated and that good economic practices should include good ecological practices. See online at: <http://www.diakonia.org.za/attachments/39>. Assessed: 15 October, 2012

13 For example, Hinduism (Dwivedi, 2000:18 ) holds that as long as Mother Earth is able to sustain the magnificent mountains, rivers, forests and all that nourished thereby, she will be able to nourish the whole humanity. According to Roger Gottlieb (2010:132) in Hinduism, deep ecology, which he interprets as "intimacy with place, a sense of being in the world with immediacy, care, and frugality" is affirmed by reflection on traditional texts that proclaim a continuity between the human order and nature, through ritual activities, and through applying meditative techniques that foster a felt experience of one's relationship with the elements. In Chinese Daoist thought, the ecological crisis is directly linked to peoples' worldviews, ideas, values and theories of knowledge (*Uppsala Manifesto*, 2008:38); Buddhism constantly reminds its followers of the importance of living in tune with nature, to live simply and use

religions together in their concern over the issue (one example is the *Uppsala Interfaith Climate Manifesto*, 2008). Indeed, according to Coward and Maguire (2000:65), if one wishes to address the most significant topics of today in the current eco-crisis of overpopulation, overconsumption and environmental degradation *all* religions should be brought into the conversation.

Individual theologians have in fact been part of the conversation on the environment, since Lynn White's famous 1967 attack on the Judaea/Christian tradition for having taken the notion on "dominion" to mean liberty to take from nature whatever and whenever humanity pleases. Since then theologians have developed ecologically sensitive theologies to defend the Scripture from such accusations. This defense is still going on today, with scholars such as Ellen F. Davis (2009) highlighting that the Hebrew Scriptures are environmentally friendly because of its continuous land-centered character. That is also why New Testament scholars, such as John Weaver and Margot R. Hodson (2007:9) write that any examination of the Gospels and the life of the early Church shows Jesus and the disciples showing proper respect for the physical world in which they lived and that Jesus himself drew many lessons from the natural world. In fact, going through Christian history theologians are keen to show there was a profound understanding of the interconnectedness of relationship with God, one another and the natural world. Ernst Conradie and David Field (2000:72), for example, jointly comment on Francis of Assisi's affinity for nature, which was for him a source of joy, wonder, praise and gratitude for the gift of life. Francis believed every creature serves as a mirror of God's presence and is therefore worthy to be treated with loving respect. Jürgen Moltmann (1993), in order to motivate Christians to look at nature with the eyes of God, discusses the relationship between God and nature by theologically discovering God in all of nature. These are merely the tip of an iceberg that include many more theologians such as Coward and Maguire (2000). The latter have challenged humanity to always ask itself how green its worldview is and what lifestyles it promotes. One important aspect of this, and one that will be important for the purposes of this study via the work of Ernst Conradie, is the issue of consumerist cultures and consumerist lifestyles. From an environmental perspective studies have been done on the history (e.g. Peter

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nature as a spiritual force (Eckel, 1997: 337-8); and, in Islam, "it is not humankind that subdues the earth, but Allah that subdues earth for humankind. Humans are in the middle of a two way-relationships; humankind is *khalifa*, that is, in charge of , and therefore responsible for what is below, but humankind is slave, to what is above; humans must look after what is below because their answerability to what is above. Indeed humans must be *khalifa* precisely because they are '*abd*'" (Dutton, 2003:329).

N. Sterns, 2000) and origins of consumerism in the West (e.g., Kerstin Briuckweh, 2011), on different theories of consumerism (e.g. Mica Nava, 1992) and also on the theological implications of consumerism (cf. the work done by Sally McFague (1993), Tim Cooper (1990), Allan Verhey (2002) and, of course, Ernst Conradie).

Conradie is one of the major conversation partners in this study and his considerable oeuvre on ecotheological themes will form the basis of much that will be said here. Though not limited to ecotheological themes, Conradie's contribution to this field of study is impressive and will be discussed in detail in Chapter Three.<sup>14</sup> In short, Conradie is convinced that:

The earth is God's house. God has invited us as humans, together with other species in God's household, to tend and keep our rooms and to make ourselves at home. Instead, we failed to find a home for ourselves and we are now threatening to destroy the whole household ... (2005a:184)

In order to prevent this, humanity needs to get its house in order, or rather God's house, which humanity occupies. For Christians, one way of doing this is by coming to grips with what their faith teaches about creation, by way of ecotheological insights. Conradie describes ecotheology as an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom in Christianity as a response to environmental threats and injustice. At the same time it (eco-theology) attempts to reinvestigate, rediscover and renew the Christian tradition in the light of the challenges posed by the environmental crisis with special emphasis on the consumerist lifestyle (2008:17). Again the phantom of consumerism and consumerist culture appears and, as will be seen, it constitutes a very important focus in the more recent work of Conradie, it will thus also be an important focus in this study.

The reference to culture as such is also very important to this study. As Kraft (1980:46) comments, culture and Christianity as a religion should be treated together. This is especially true since in African context. As Martin Ott (2000:148) asserts, culture and religion in societies relate to each other like the two foci of an ellipse. Much has been written on the relationship between Christianity/ faith/ theology and culture and as such this also falls into the ambit of this study. It is especially the classic work of Richard Niebuhr (*Christ and Culture*, 1951) with its five paradigms of how "Christ relates to culture" that is to be used as an important point of

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<sup>14</sup> Conradie's theological themes include sin (2005c), justice (2000, 2010d), salvation (2010e, 2011b), gender (2006a), morality (2006b), anthropology (2005a), mission (2010a), Bible interpretation (2009a), the church (2008).

departure for considering what the relationship may be between Chewa cultural beliefs, values and practices and a possible ecotheology for the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod.

Part of this reflection is also the very difficult issue of exactly how one may define culture, what it is and what its characteristics are. For this the study turns to the seminal works of anthropologist Clifford Geertz (especially his views on cultural worldviews, 1973), but also on the works of Helen Spencer-Oatly, Alfred Kroeber and Clyde Kluckholm. This also entails a need to clarify what exactly Chewa culture is, and again both theological as well as non-theological studies is utilised for this, e.g. those of Malawian scholars such as Winston Raphael Kawale (1998), but also others, such as Katani (2008), and the seminal works on Chewa culture by Breugel (2001) and Ott (2000).

## **1.7 Basic outline of the study**

*Chapter 1* of the study explains the background to the study. It gives the problem statement (primary and secondary research questions), aims and hypothesis of this thesis and an introduction to the most important sources and conversation partners to the study.

*Chapter 2* offers an overview of the global, African and Malawian ecological context. The two primary categories of causes for the current ecological crisis are identified, namely natural and human-made causes and specific examples of these are listed and elaborated on. To In order to localise and contextualise this study, this chapter also offers an overview of the physical, demographical, economic and political conditions and characteristics of the Malawi.

*Chapter 3* follows the thought of Conradie in his understanding of “the term church” as an actor in efforts to find solutions to the environmental crisis in countries around the world. Conradie’s main arguments around the importance of churches in this regard, the theological principles on which an ecotheology should be based, and solutions (from a theological and faith perspective) to the ecological crisis are discussed. Special emphasis is placed on Conradie’s view on consumer culture as one of the root causes of the ecological crisis and its theological implications.

*Chapter 5* focuses on the issue of culture: its definition, characteristics and manifestations. It also asks questions regarding the relationship between faith/theology and culture before moving on to give an overview of elements of Chewa cultural practices, beliefs and values. It also relates the characteristics of Chewa culture which may represent a cultural

sensitivity toward the environment to Conradie's ecotheological principles, including his views on consumerism. Then it asks how Chewa culture may help or present obstacles for the formulation and operationalisation of an own ecotheology/-ies in the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod. Finally, the chapter gives the summary of the whole of the argument in the study and offers some concluding remarks as to the practical ways in which the Nkhoma Synod may promote an ecotheological sensitivity among its members.

## **1.8 Conclusion**

In light of the current global discourse on the impact and extent of the global ecological crisis, also in Christian theological and church circles, the question arises whether Nkhoma Synod C.C.A.P. has an ecological responsibility and also what the theological reasons behind this responsibility may be. It also inevitably also raises the question of what the content of such a theology may be and whether it may have unique characteristics or contain unique elements within the Malawian and Chewa cultural context. As a starting point to this discussion, however the nature, causes and extent of the ecological crisis globally and in Malawi in particular should be investigated. This will be done in the following chapter.

## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **MALAWI AND THE GLOBAL ECOLOGICAL CRISIS**

#### **2.1. Introduction**

In this chapter an overview will be given of the current state of the ecological crisis, globally and in Malawi. However, first an overview of the Malawi itself will be given in order to place the ecological crisis in the historical, geographical and economic context of the country. The focus will then shift to some scientific explanations of the meaning, manifestations, extent and consequences of the ecological crisis – both from a global, but in particular from a Malawian perspective. The aim of this chapter is to offer the necessary background to the discussion on how the ecological crisis constitutes a threat to humanity and creation and how it may be addressed in ecotheological terms according to Ernst Conradie (Chapter Three) and the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod in light of the ecotheological insights of Conradie, but also in a way that takes cognizance of environmentally-relevant elements in traditional Chewa culture (Chapters Four and Five).

#### **2.2. Malawi: An Overview of the Country**

##### *2.2.1. Geography*

Malawi is a landlocked country south of the equator in Central Africa. With neighboring countries Zambia, Tanzania and Mozambique, Malawi covers a total area of 118,484 square kilometers, 20% of which consists of three lakes, Lake Malawi (Africa's third largest body of freshwater, which spans almost two thirds of the length of the country's eastern border), Lake Chirwa and Lake Phalombe. These lakes are economic assets in terms of both Malawi's fishing and tourist industries. Lake Malawi is known for its wide variety of the fish. In fact, between 500 and 1000 different species of fish (90% from the Cichlid family) are found in the lake and many of them are found only in this lake.

Lake Malawi has one main outlet, the Shire River, from which the country generates its hydro-electric power. One of Malawi's most striking topographical features is that it forms part of the African Great Rift Valley. The latter runs down the entire length of the country, passes through Lake Malawi in the northern and central regions down to the Shire Valley in the south.



The Shire River drains the water from Lake Malawi into the Zambezi River in Mozambique. On both sides of the lake are fertile plains and mountain ranges, the peaks of the latter ranging from 1700 to 3000 meters above sea level.

### 2.2.2 *Climate*

The climate of Malawi is to a large degree influenced by its altitude and its proximity to Lake Malawi. Generally speaking, Malawi enjoys a tropical continental climate. There are two main synoptic systems or rain-bearing systems that bring rainfall to the country: (i) the Inter-Tropical Convergence Zone, and (ii) the Congo Air Mass or Zaire Air Boundary. Other factors that influence the Malawian climate are anti-cyclones, easterly waves, and occasional tropical cyclones. Due to differences in altitude and subsequent differences in rainfall, the country may be further divided into three climate regions: (i) semi-arid (Shire Valley and some parts along the Lakeshore Plain) (ii) semi-arid to sub-humid (medium altitude plateaus), and (iii) sub-humid (high altitude plateaus and hilly areas). With regard to rainfall, two distinct seasons can be distinguished: a rainy season lasting from November to April and a dry season extending from May to October. The months of May to August are cool and dry; September to November are warm and dry; and November to April, warm and wet. In some high altitude plateau regions, such as the Shire Highlands, drizzle (locally known as *Chiperoni*) is quite common during May, June and July, which are also the coldest months in Malawi. However, as will also be noted below, there has already occurred a shift in rainfall patterns in Malawi due to climate change.

### 2.2.3. *Population*

According to most recent government statistics (2008), Malawi's population stands at 15,066,320, of which 51% are female and 49% male. The number of persons 18 years and older is 6,216,432, of whom more than half (3,200,000) are female. The overall average life expectancy in Malawi is 37 years (Botolo and Ntupanyama, 2011:20). Malawi's population figures show an increase from 9.9 million since 1998 – an overall population growth of 32%. This equals a growth rate of 2.8% per annum compared to 2.0% in 1998 (cf. Msangaambe, 2001:14). According to the *Malawi State of Environment and Outlook Report: Environment for Sustainable Economic Growth* (in Botolo and Ntupanyama, 2010:26), the 1998 Crude Birth Rate (CBR – the total number of infants born to all women in their reproductive years) in Malawi was



about 37.9 births per thousand in 1998 and it increased to 39.5 by 2008. The population in the Northern Region of the country grew faster than in the Central and Southern Regions (from 911,767 in 1987 to 1,233,560 in 1998 and to 1,698,502 in 2008). In the Central Region, the population has grown from 3,110,986 in 1987 to 4,066,340 in 1998 and to 5,491,034 in 2008, whereas in the south, the population increased from 3,965,734 in 1987 to 4,633,968 in 1998 and to 5,876,784 in 2008. The CBR is higher in rural areas (40.4) where poverty levels are also higher than those in the urban areas (34.6). At regional levels, the CBR is 39.9 in the Northern Region, 40.5 in the Central Region and 38.6 in the Southern Region. These increases in population are a point of concern for a country with limited land (9.4 m ha) and other natural resources. The population density in the country is 139 persons per km<sup>2</sup> (also up from 105 in 1998). This makes Malawi one of the most densely populated countries on the African continent.

At district level, the highest percentage of the population live in Lilongwe rural area. Lilongwe, which is also the seat of the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod, also has the highest population (669,021) of any urban area. Lilongwe is followed by Blantyre with 661,444 inhabitants, Mzuzu with 128,432, and finally Zomba with 87,366 inhabitants. About 85% of Malawians still live in rural areas and derive their livelihoods from subsistence farming – each family of about five people holding about 1.0 to 5.0 ha of agricultural land. Because of Malawi's high population of young people – more than 40% of Malawians are below 15 years of age – it has a high dependency ratio of 1.01 per every economically-active adult (Botolo and Ntupanyama, 2011:22). This is one of the factors behind the alarming fact that about 60% of the rural and 65% of the urban population live below the poverty line (NECCCS 2012-2016<sup>15</sup>, 2012:1)!

#### 2.2.4 Administration

With regard to its administration, Malawi is divided into three regions, namely; the Northern, Central and Southern Regions. The Northern Region consists of six districts, the Central Region of nine, and the Southern Region of thirteen districts. The districts are subdivided into traditional authorities (TAs), over which chiefs preside. Each TA comprises of villages that constitute the smallest administrative units in the country and that are presided over by village headmen. Interestingly, for the purposes of this study is the fact that all public land and village forests are

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<sup>15</sup> NECCCS 2012-2016 as an abbreviation of the National Environment and Climate Change Communication Strategy 2012-2016, formulated in August 2012. It refers to is strategy formulated by the Malawi Ministry of Environment and Climate Change Management: Environmental Affairs Department.

owned by these chiefs. Regional and district administrations are partly responsible for protecting customary forests through this hierarchy of chieftainship.

#### 2.2.5. *Economy*

Malawi has diverse, albeit limited, natural resources, which forms the basis of its economy. The main natural resources in Malawi are minerals, agricultural land, forests and wildlife (including fish). However, as Msangaambe (2011:44) comments, despite this, Malawi is economically one of the poorest countries in the world – as will be seen below, it is growing even poorer due to the effects of the global and local ecological crisis. The United Nations (UN) has classified Malawi as one of the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) in the world, with one of the lowest Human Development Index (HDI) values (0.464) – it ranks 163rd out of 174 countries in the world in 2000 (cf. Botolo and Ntupanyama, 2011:53). Malawi's economy is based largely on agriculture that contributes approximately 40% to the GDP. The agriculture sector also accounts for an estimated 85% of the total employment and 90% of Malawian export earnings. The economy of the country is thus highly dependent upon rainfall. Agriculture is dominated by the cultivation of tobacco, tea, sugar, maize, beans, cotton, and coffee (tobacco forms 67 to 70% of agricultural produce). The Malawian Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita was estimated at 182.00 USD in 1999, which is the lowest of all SADC member countries (Botolo and Ntupanyama, 2011:54). Finally, among the natural resources of the country, fish is a vital source of both cash income and animal protein. According to Botolo and Ntupanyama (2011:42), the fishing sector contributes about 4% to Gross Domestic Product (GDP), but accounts for between 60 to 70% of Malawians' annual animal protein intake.

With the above discouraging picture of Malawi in the background, the following sections will look at the meaning, extent, causes and manifestations of the ecological crisis, first globally and then in Malawi itself.

## 2.2 The Meaning in of the “Global Ecological Crisis”

As was referred to in Chapter 1 of this study, much has been written on the global ecological crisis over the past decades.<sup>16</sup> This has been and is done from different disciplinary perspectives,

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<sup>16</sup> With regard to the origins of the discourse on global warming Burroughs (2003:29), explains that: “An initiative of the international Geophysical Year for scientific research in 1957-58 was to establish careful

revealing the different faces of the crisis as well as different emphases with regard to the crisis (cf., e.g., Anderson, 2010:99 and Gottlieb, 2010:355, 357). Of course, as was seen and will be elaborated upon, the ecological crisis has been and is also reflected upon by theologians.

The ecological crisis has, however, mostly been reflected upon from a natural science perspective. Any number of definitions of the ecological crisis may be offered but one useful, succinct and simple definition is found in the definition in the “Durban Natural Science Museum Magazine”, namely that it refers to the altering of global climatic systems and conditions, loss of inhabitants and species of living things and the displacement of natural creation (Durban Natural Science Museum Magazine 2009:2). With regard to atmospheric and climate change, the gradual depletion of the ozone layer and the related “greenhouse effect”<sup>17</sup> forms the most important element of the discourse on the ecological crisis. It is generally agreed that the greenhouse effect has reached crisis proportions as a consequence of industrial growth, massive urbanisation and greatly increased energy consumption. This is, however, only the short answer to the question regarding the reasons for the current crisis as it developed since the 1960s. The following section will therefore look in more detail at the causes of the ecological crisis.

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measurements of carbon dioxide on the Mauna Loa mountain observatory in Hawaii, far from the industrial centers of the world. These, and other later observations around the world, confirmed the build-up of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and formed the basis for concluding that human activities were altering the atmosphere.” According to Burroughs, by 1985, the evidence was sufficiently compelling so that an international meeting of scientists in Villach, Austria declared that human activities were leading to global warming and if not controlled would lead to dangerous climate change.

17 In simple terms, greenhouse gasses refer to a variety of gaseous compounds (such as carbon dioxide) that absorb infrared radiation, trap heat in the atmosphere and in this way contribute to the greenhouse effect. See online: <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/greenhouse%20gas>. (Assessed: 23 July 2014). According to the South African Climate Action Network (SACAN), greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere by themselves are natural and necessary. However, it is an excess of greenhouse gasses that presents a problem: “Earth has a natural temperature control system. Atmospheric concentration of certain gases, known as greenhouse gases, is critical to maintain this system. On average, about one third of the solar radiation (sunlight and heat) that reaches Earth are reflected back into space. Of the remaining radiation, the atmosphere absorbs some, but the land and oceans absorb most. The Earth’s surface becomes warmer and as a result emits heat. The greenhouse gases form a barrier that traps the heat, warming the atmosphere. Naturally occurring greenhouse gases include water vapour, carbon dioxide, methane and nitrous oxide. There is also a range of man-made chemicals that are very effective at keeping heat in the atmosphere. The concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere is rising as a consequence of human activity.” See online at: [www.sacan.org.za](http://www.sacan.org.za). (Assessed 26 September 2013).

### 2.3.1. Causes of the Ecological Crisis

The causes of the ecological crisis as identified by scientists may be divided into two broad categories: natural causes (or as is sometimes referred to, “acts of God”) and those caused by the activities of human beings. This distinction is explained below:

#### 2.3.1.1. *Natural Causes of Ecological Crises*

Not all natural disasters are caused by humans and the contemporary ecological crisis is also not solely the result of human activity. According to Stephen Mosley (2010:1), throughout human history, humans have been modifying and adapting their environment for survival, but over the past 4 million years, large-scale environmental transformations were almost exclusively produced by natural forces. These forces are, for example, continental drifts, major volcanic eruptions and naturally occurring changes in climatic conditions.<sup>18</sup> Burroughs (2010:151-153), for example, identifies possible natural courses of climate change worldwide as changes in atmospheric-oceanic interactions, sunspots and solar activity, the influence of tidal forces and the planet’s orbital variations. He further explains that climate change, as one manifestation of the current ecological crisis, is in part the result of the process called “auto variance”. The latter occurs when the principal global climatic elements interact with one another in a complex manner in the atmosphere and natural changes in the atmospheric chemicals then influence the changes in the natural temperature on the planet. This gradually leads to global warming. Burroughs thus also agrees with Mosley that many natural causes of ecological change may be traced back many years into the past, even before the existence of any human-made industrial technology *and* that some of these forces also remain present and exerts an influence on the global environment today. As a result of these natural disasters, human and non-human living organisms are being displaced. People are left homeless, but whole ecosystems are also destroyed, sea levels rise, crops are destroyed by natural disasters causing food shortages and loss of (human and non-human) life (Burroughs, 2010: 151-153).

What is true for the rest of the world in this regard is, of course, also true for Africa and for Malawi in particular. As will be seen below, one of the main manifestations of the ecological crisis in Africa are continuous, severe droughts on a continent where many regions suffer water

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<sup>18</sup> According to Burroughs (2010:155), on the timescale of tens of millions of years, changes in the level of CO<sub>2</sub> in the atmosphere were controlled by two processes which are (a) the atmospheric input by volcanoes, (b) the weathering of exposed silicate rocks, which depletes the atmosphere of CO<sub>2</sub>.

scarcity even during the best of times. Droughts are, however also a natural occurrence on the continent. Historically, according to scientists (cf., e.g., the so-called *Sahel Drought Report*), the 1930s to the 1990s saw the heavy tropical rainfall band called the Intertropical Convergence Zone shifting back and forth near the equator. Starting in the 1960s, the rainfall band shifted southward, drying out Central Africa and parts of South America and South Asia. Scientists claim that some catastrophic droughts in Africa, such as those that devastated the continent in the late-twentieth century, especially in the Sahel, Nigeria, Niger, Ghana and Mali, are the norm rather than the exception and also not due to human activity. It did, however, also result in the destruction of farmland, major economic losses and large-scale migrations, thus exacerbating the already negative consequences of global climate change. According to IPCC and UN FCCC, the current water crisis in Africa may be the result of severe droughts in the 1970s and 1980s (cf. IPCC, 1997 and UN FCCC, 2007). According to Bronnimann et al. (2008:209), for example, among the natural causes of the contemporary African ecological crisis is deficient freshwater, but that may be traced back to the severe droughts of 1970s and 1980s.

Even in Malawi one finds an example of natural climate change as is described in an early study by Pike (1960). According to this study, there is evidence along the northwestern shores of the 3 000 000-year-old Lake Malawi that, already in the Pleistocene period, considerable climatic and hydrographic change occurred that led to the extinction of several animal species. What is disturbing is that it seems that the prevalence of natural disasters are on the whole increasing, as are extreme weather conditions (cf., e.g., the reports by the Asian Disaster Reduction Center – ADRC). According to the Malawian Department of National Disaster and Preparedness (NDP, 2011), Malawi is currently also more prone to natural disasters.<sup>19</sup>

Finally, according to Botolo and Ntupanyama (2011:3), over the last four decades, the number and the impact of both natural and man-made disasters have significantly increased, and this has mostly been affecting the least-developed countries of the world, including many African countries. According the authors, in the last ten years, worldwide 254 million people were affected by natural disasters. The poor have the least capacity to cope with and recover

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19 Some examples listed by the NDP (from 2013 only!) include: April 24, when rains in Malawi damaged than 200 houses; January 29, when hailstorms caused the displacement of hundreds of families in the Mzimba and Chitipa districts of Malawi; January 14, when gale force winds in Zomba injured 16 Malawians; January 11, when flooding in Malawi, killed three and displaced 5,000 people.

from the effects of such disasters and mostly do not have adequate security and protection in order to recover when access to basic necessities such as food, water, shelter and health services are destroyed. Generally, also, it is the most vulnerable among the poor, namely women and children, who are in many cases the hardest hit in such situations.

### 2.3.1.2. *Human Causes of Ecological Crisis*

According to scientists, despite the importance of natural causes of ecological crises, as far as the current ecological crisis is concerned, human activities have by far been the greater culprit. This is, for example, clearly the case in the view of Burroughs (2003:29), according to whom: “We are constantly being reminded that the scale of man’s exploitation of his environment has now reached disastrous proportions.” Two of the main causes behind for the current ecological crisis are increased human industrial activities and global population growth.

Since the realization of the threatening global ecological crisis in the previous century, *human industrial activities* have been identified as one of the major contributors to the current global ecological crisis – especially as these have facilitated unprecedented increases in the emission of harmful gasses into the atmosphere. These, in turn, changed the normal atmospheric composition and has led to increased global temperatures.

In this regard, African scholar Evans Njewa (2011:6-7) points out that: “Human activities result in emissions of four principal greenhouse gases (GHGs): carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>), methane (CH<sub>4</sub>), nitrous oxide (N<sub>2</sub>O) and the halocarbons.” Njewa also argues that this is mainly due to the pollution in the Northern Hemisphere – in the past mainly America and Europe, but recently joined by the likes of China and India.

*Over population* is, according to scientists such as Coward and Maguire (2000:65),<sup>20</sup> another major cause of the ecological crisis as this leads to overconsumption and increased competition for and pressure on natural resources. The issue of over population has been a long-standing threat to the global natural environment. Already by 1970s, scholars like Warren (1976:118) expressed concern and warned against the growing congestion of humanity on earth. Warren observed that the phenomenal growth in the world’s population was the most staggering development of the first sixty years of the previous century. To Warren, this biological fact then

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<sup>20</sup> Coward and Maguire (2000:65) especially emphasise the connection between the ecological crisis on the one hand and uncontrolled population and overconsumption on the other as a serious, in fact, “overwhelming” global challenge.

already constituted a far greater threat to world peace than any nuclear war. In Africa, according to Mante (2004:17), the plight of the continent is rooted precisely in its extreme rate of population growth – the fastest of any continent at any time in history! This is partly due to the introduction of public health measures and vaccinations that have reduced mortality rates.

The consequences of the above phenomena – a combination of increased industrial activity and overpopulation – may in turn be connected to many of the manifestations of the ecological crisis in the world, which will be the focus of the next section.

## **2.4. Faces of the Ecological Crisis in Malawi**

The ecological crisis is just one of the contemporary challenges facing the world. According to the Liu Institute of Global Issues (Lin, 2014) the following interrelated issues today constitute the major “global issues” facing humanity: Global militarism and wars; the population explosion; global poverty and global human rights abuses; the absence of global regulation or planning regarding the future; and the global environmental crisis. With regard to the environmental crisis the Institute identifies nine forms which the current ecological crisis takes. In the following four sections, a combination of these forms of the crisis will be discussed as they pertain to Malawi.

### *2.4.1. Deforestation, Soil Erosion and Desertification*

Forests capture 59% of harmful carbon dioxide on earth (phytoplankton in the oceans capture the rest) and also produce oxygen without which no life is possible. Forests furthermore trap moisture and help prevent soil erosion; they form the habitat of the majority of the earth’s animal species; and play an important role in maintaining world weather patterns. About 8,000 years ago forests covered almost half of the planet, a total area of more than 6 billion hectares. The clearing of this world’s forests has been the most dramatic transformation ever of the earth’s surface by humankind (Mosley 2010: 31). The reason behind global mass deforestation is partly accelerated population growth in the past century. By 1972 (Weiss ed. 1972:34, 82), about two thirds of the world’s forests had already been cleared for agricultural or commercial use and a third of the oceans’ phytoplankton had been destroyed. Within the next twenty years, from 1972 to 1992, the total forestry loss of the world was 2.5 million hectares.



In Malawi, according to the AGRIFOR Consultant of Commission of the European Communities (2006) rate of deforestation in the three regions of the country ,from 1972 and 1992, speaks of a similar situation:

*Deforestation between 1972 and 1992 for both indigenous and plantation forests*

<b>Region</b>	<b>1972 total forest area (ha)</b>	<b>1992 total forest area (ha)</b>	<b>Total forest lost (ha)</b>
North	1,507,266	470,238	1,037,028
Central	1,488,110	777,217	710,893
South	1,404,510	650,860	753,650
<b>Total</b>	<b>4,399,886</b>	<b>1,898,315</b>	<b>2,501,571</b>

*Source: Malawi Forestry Department, 1993.*

According to Yanira Ntupanyama<sup>21</sup> (2010:170), by 2010, the rate of deforestation in Malawi was estimated at 1% per year. Most of the time, the size of the human population in an area determines how much and the ways in which land is used. Ntupanyama ascribes this increase in deforestation mainly to human activities such as agricultural expansion, increased human settlement, unsustainable harvesting for energy and timber requirements, uncontrolled fires, and climate change. Ntupanyama also mentions population growth, poverty, HIV/Aids and land tenure as some of the indirect causes of forest degradation.

Linked to the increase in global deforestation, is increased erosion. The Institute of Global Issues (Lin, 2014) reports that world has lost one fifth of its arable land over the last decade alone, which also means a loss in vital nutrients, moisture and microorganisms in the soil (Mosley, 2010:57). In Malawi, by 1972, soil erosion loss already occurred on an alarming scale. This impacts the fertility of the soil overall as well as the crop yield of agricultural land and this in a country where one in every two children under the age five years is already suffering from chronic malnourishment (Botolo and Ntupanyama, 2011:172).

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<sup>21</sup> Yanira Ntupanyama is the Director of Environmental Affairs in the Ministry of Natural Resources, Energy and Environment in Malawi. She also facilitates the production of the National Communication Documents of the Republic of Malawi to the Conferences of the Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (NCDRM/COP/UNFCCC) as well as the Malawi State of Environment and Outlook Report: Environment for Sustainable Economic Growth (MSEOR/ESEG). Most of the figures on the current state of the environment in Malawi comes from these two official sources.



According to 1992 World Bank estimates, the loss of soil and consequent impact on the yield of farmland in the main agricultural areas in Malawi (the Kasungu and Lilongwe Agriculture Development Divisions), amounts to 20 and 22t/ha per year respectively! The estimates of the World Bank further shows that the so-called social cost (i.e., for example, in malnutrition and health expenditure) associated with soil erosion in Malawi is MK1, 155 million (US\$165 million) which corresponded to 8.1% of the country's GDP in 1994.

#### *2.4.2. Increased Greenhouse Gas Emissions and Temperatures*

Fossil fuels (oil, natural gas and coal) and biomass<sup>22</sup> remain the primary energy sources of the world. Though needed, these resources are both non-renewable and their use leads to pollution and extensive carbon dioxide emissions harm the environment and worsen the greenhouse effect that is responsible for the global rise in temperatures. It is predicted that global temperatures will rise by one to three degrees Celsius by 2100 in response to the rise in greenhouse gas emissions. This is on top of its causing a growing hole in the ozone layer, the protective shield against ultraviolet radiation which is harmful to all life on earth (cf. Marsh, 1996:4)! And again, the bigger the population of any region of the world, the greater will be its demands for energy. As may be expected, with its mainly rural population and high deforestation rate, Malawi is largely dependent on biomass as its energy resource. It also uses coal and hydroelectricity as energy sources. According to Ntupanyama (2010:48), in rural households about 67% of fuel used for cooking and heating comes from wood (15% in urban households).

A recent study by clinical researcher Duncan Fullerton (2009) has confirmed that Malawi is one of the countries with the highest indoor air pollution levels from biomass fuels. This poses a serious threat to the health of the population. The study further showed that there are significant differences between air pollution levels from biomass fuel in urban and rural homes. Rural households show higher levels through use of wood for cooking, while urban homes have high carbon monoxide concentrations due to the use of charcoal. Furthermore, wood is even used as an energy source in industry: 7% of the total annual wood used in this way is used in tobacco and tea industries and 11% is used in small scale and urban industries. Malawi is also not innocent with regard to greenhouse gas emissions from other sources. Ntupanyama (2011:75)

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<sup>22</sup> Ntupanyama (2010:48) describes biomass as “fuel wood obtained from firewood, charcoal, and crop/industry residues”.

reports that greenhouse gas emission in Malawi also takes place in the energy sector and product use sector.

On a global scale, however, one may note that the contribution of greenhouse gas emissions by African countries remain minimal, a mere meager 3%, of the world total. Yet, Africa is rated the continent most vulnerable to the adverse and negative impact of climate change because of widespread poverty and low adaptive capacity.

One further effect of increased gas emissions is a global increase in acid rain which is caused by nitrogen dioxide (NO<sub>2</sub>) and sulphur dioxide emissions (SO<sub>2</sub>). Both these gases dissolve in water, producing highly acidic solutions. Already in 1924, Danish chemist Peder Lauritz Sørensen<sup>23</sup> found that SO<sub>2</sub> and NO<sub>2</sub> gasses can be transported hundreds of miles before they settle on land or water. The ecological effects of acid rain are most clearly seen in the aquatic environments, such as streams, lakes and marshlands. Lakes and streams become acidic (i.e., the pH value drops) when the water itself and its surrounding soil cannot buffer the acid rain enough in order to neutralize it. In areas where buffering capacity is low, acid rain releases aluminum into lakes and streams and aluminum is highly toxic to many species of aquatic organisms. Acid rain affects forests, soil, buildings, and roads. Given the fact that, even if Malawi is not a highly industrialized country, but that the gasses forming acid rain may travel hundreds of miles, any occurrence of this may have potentially catastrophic consequences for a country that, as was seen above, relies on the fishing industry for 4% of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and on fish for 60 to 70% of its population's animal protein intake (Ntupanyama 2011:42).

#### *2.4.3. Decreased Quality and Quantity of Freshwater*

A popular saying in Malawi is that “water is life”. According to Ntupanyama (2011:39), changing global weather patterns also already influence rainfall and the availability of water in Malawi. The country has been experiencing a number of climatic hazards in recent times. Botolo and Ntupanyama (2011:3) reports that over the last decades, Malawi has experienced extreme weather events, ranging from droughts (1991/92) to floods (1996/97) and flash floods (2000/01).

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23 Cf. <http://www.palgrave.com/foundations/lewis/students/appendices/16lewisappendix.pdf>. (Assessed: 1 October 2010)

Ntupanyama also mentions that during 1996/97 crop season, while there were floods in the Southern Region, some parts of the Northern Region along the Karonga Lakeshore experienced drought conditions! In many affected areas these events had irreversible damaging effects on crop and livestock production, especially during the droughts of 1978/79, 1981/82, and the 1993/94 crop growing seasons. Since 1931, according to Ntupanyama (2013:27), the lowest lake water levels of 472.9 above mean sea level (A msl) were recorded in 1997 as a result of the severe droughts in the 1991/92 and 1994/95 rainy seasons. However, the highest recorded water levels were reported from the period 1979 to 1983, when the lake level rose to a record 477.21 A msl in May 1980! These high lake levels caused a lot of damage along the lakeshore plain areas where floods damage property and infrastructure. These water level fluctuations equally affected the Shire River, the outlet of Lake Malawi to the Indian Ocean via the Zambezi River. Lake Malawi with its catchment area of 125,000ha forms a network of rivers like the Songwe, North Rukuru, South Rukuru, Dwangwa, Linthipe and Bua. These rivers are also sources of substantial quantities of fish, including cichlis (*mbuna*). With the changing weather patterns, the fish in these water bodies have been adversely affected.

Overall, water is becoming increasingly scarce in Malawi, and the water that is there is slowly but steadily deteriorating in quality due to: (i) ground and surface water pollution (from industrial and hazardous waste and untreated municipal (including human) waste and agricultural run-off); (ii) sedimentation or siltation due to soil erosion; and (iii) fewer perennial rivers due to lower rainfall and subsequent dwindling ground water resources. At present, the water supply in Malawi is very low and rural people especially are facing difficulties in obtaining fresh water.

#### 2.4.4. *Unprecedented Extinction of Species*

Hathaway and Boff (2009:5) comments that human beings are currently causing the greatest mass extinction of species on earth since the extinction of the dinosaurs 65 million years ago. If the present rate of extinction continues, they say (2009:5), it is estimated that one half of all species of life on earth will be extinct in less than 100 years as a result of habitat destruction, pollution, invasive species and climate change.

In Malawi, according to Ntupanyama (2010:141), changes in rainfall and temperature patterns may lead to the extinction of less resilient organisms of economic importance such as

soil micro-organisms and pollinators. Victor Msukwa (1997) reports that the number of animal species in Nyala National Park in Malawi is already declining at an alarming rate because of erratic rainfall patterns associated with climate change. As climate change increases, drier areas in Chikwawa and Msanje district are also projected to be drier and to experience extreme rainfall shortages and a reduction in forest cover. The latter forms the habitat of various species of birds and other animals in that area. The trend towards the extinction of species has, however, been especially visible already with regard to the dwindling abundance of fish species in Lake Malawi.

Lake Malawi is home to over 500 Cichlid fish species, 99% of these endemic to the lake (compare this with North America's Great Lakes: Lake Malawi is only one-eighth the size of the former, which feature just 173 species, with fewer than 10% of those endemic to those lakes) (United Nations, 1997: Chapter 6). However, Lake Malawi is threatened by pollution from industrial installations along its shores and by the proposed introduction of alien (but economically more profitable) species. Botolo and Ntupanyama (2011:17) report that due to changes in temperature, Tilapia species have virtually disappeared in Lake Malawi, while the famous Chambo and Usipa species are steadily decreasing in Lake Malawi and Malombe. Climate change has also impacted on the fish stocks in Malawi. One possible solution for this is to introduce new, more resilient species of fish into the lakes. However, this will also have a negative impact on the indigenous species in the African waters. At present most of the Cichlid species in Lake Victoria to the north are facing extinction exactly as a result of the introduction of an exotic fish species. There are many other examples of introductions or invasions of non-native fish that have had severe effects on the native fish populations and regional economics. These examples should provide a clear warning against the proposed introductions of exotic fish into Lake Malawi.

## **2.5. Conclusion**

This chapter started by giving an overview of Malawi as a country which, due to the size of its population and scarcity of natural resources is a likely candidate experiencing the negative effects of the current global ecological crisis to a substantial degree. After giving an overview of what is understood under the term "ecological crisis" and the identification of two forms of causes of the crisis – natural and human – and a short discussion on the main two causes in the

latter category (increased human industrial activity and overpopulation), some of the current faces/manifestations of the ecological crisis were identified as they pertain to Malawi.

It was shown that in Malawi the main important climatic variables affected or influenced by the crisis are rainfall and temperature (cf. Botolo and Ntupanyama, 2011:23) and that due to natural and human-made disasters, Malawians have over the years already experienced its fair share of misfortune. This has left marginalized sections of society such as the elderly, disabled, the sick, the poor, women and children even more vulnerable. Almost all economic sectors have already been affected in Malawi. Divide Njewa (2011:24) reports that the Malawian agricultural, energy, fisheries, forestry, wildlife, human health and water sectors all have already been adversely affected by climate change resulting in pressure on food supplies and sustainable livelihoods (Ntupanyama, 2011:2), physical infrastructure and economic growth and development. It has also been mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, that much has been written over the past decades on the ecological crisis; especially by natural scientists but also that the discourse on the crisis also includes voices from faith bodies and also from individual theologians, proponents of the relatively new field called ecotheology. With this in mind that ecotheological thought of Ernst Conradie, a theologian from African soil, will be discussed in the next chapter to identify some ecotheological considerations that the CCPA Nkhoma Synod may take into account should it endeavor to formulate its own understanding of ecotheology. With this discussion one also finds an interesting addition to the above list of causes to the global ecological crisis as identified by Conradie, namely the contemporary excessive growth in the global consumer culture.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE ECOLOGICAL CRISIS, ECOTHEOLOGY, AND CONSUMER CULTURE: THE THOUGHT OF ERNST CONRADIE

#### 3.1 Introduction

En route to shedding some light on the need for and possible content of ecotheological understanding in the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod, this chapter will first answer in more detail the question of exactly what ecotheology is. This is one of the reasons why this chapter will focus on the ecotheological works and thought of South African theologian Ernst M. Conradie. As will be seen, Conradie's reflections on consumerism as a root cause of the ecological crisis will at the same time enrich the ecological discourse in this study thus far.

Conradie teaches Systematic Theology and Christian Ethics in the Department of Religion and Theology at the University of the Western Cape in Bellville, South Africa. A prolific writer, Conradie has produced more than 130 theological journal articles, chapters in books or monographs, many of which are in the field of ecotheology and as such he is one of the foremost proponents of the field on the African continent.<sup>24</sup>

In this chapter a general introduction to Conradie's ecotheological thought will be given as well as his understanding of the field and his view of the global ecological crisis as both a spiritual and cultural crisis. Especially important in the context of this study is also Conradie's view that the understanding of environmental threats may help the church to understand what is involved in this regard with reference to the culture and traditions of any specific group of people

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. It will be impossible to give an detailed description of all Conradie's published works on ecotheological, but the most important (English) ones *Hope for the earth – Vistas on a new century* (Wipf & Stock, 2000/2005); *An ecological Christian anthropology: At home on earth?* (Ashgate, 2005); *Christianity and ecological theology: Resources for research* (SUN Press, 2006); *Christianity and a critique of consumerism: A survey of six points of entry* (Bible Media, 2009); *Saving the Earth? The legacy of reformed views on "re-creation"* (LIT Verlag 2013); *The church and climate change* (Pietermaritzburg: Cluster Publications, 2008); *Christianity and earthkeeping: In search of an inspiring vision* (SUN Press, 2011); (with David Field) *A rainbow over the land. A South African guide on the church and environmental justice* (Western Cape Provincial Council of Churches, 2000); he edited, among other books, *Creation and Salvation: Dialogue on Abraham Kuyper's Legacy for Contemporary Ecotheology* (Brill Publishers, 2011); (with Sipho Mtethwa and Andre Warmback) *The land is crying for justice. A discussion document on Christianity and environmental justice in South Africa* (EFSA, 2002); *Climate change – A challenge to the church in South Africa* (SACC, 2009); he was also the editor for an ecclesial task team that produced *Does Matter matter? Theological reflection on that which is material, bodily and earthly* (DRC, 2012)

as this is connected to the foci in Chapters Four and Five of this study with reference to the culture of the Chewa of Malawi. Furthermore, Conradie (2005a:1) sees ecotheology as an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom in Christianity as a response to environmental threats and injustice. At the same time, for him, it is an attempt to reinvestigate, rediscover and renew the Christian tradition in the light of the challenges posed by the environmental crisis. In Chapter Five it will be asked whether this may also be true with regard to environmentally-sensitive traditional cultural values and practices.

Speaking of culture, much of which will be discussed will center on Conradie's understanding of the crisis as a spiritual and cultural crisis of a very specific sort, namely as a consequence of the global spread of consumerist culture. The theological principles behind Conradie's critique of consumerism will be discussed in detail as much of his general ecotheological thought, principles and emphases also reflected in this focus. Finally, Conradie's suggestions on *how* the crisis may be addressed from a theological perspective will be discussed.

With regard to a theological response to the ecological crisis that the world faces, Conradie often refers to the role of the church. He remains convinced that the church should be and is one of the institutions that may offer hope in the predicament humanity and the rest of creation finds themselves in. A good place to start, before looking in detail at Conradie's ecotheological principles will, therefore, be to take a short detour and look at his understanding of "the church" – also seeing that this study concerns "a church", the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod.

### **3.2. Conradie on and the Meaning the "Church"**

In discussing the role of the church in addressing the environmental crisis, Conradie (2008:10) describes it (the church) with reference to six manifestations thereof, which are in turn related to its different activities as proposed by another South African theologian, Dirk Smit. For Smit, and thus for Conradie (2008:11-24), the church manifests itself in the following ways:

- i) As the local congregation.
- ii) As the worshipping community that worships together on Sundays and at other organized worship services and events.
- iii) As a denomination whose top leadership acts as its face, responsible for developing programs for projects at regional and national level linking to international bodies.

- iv) As ecumenical church structures, such as the World Council of Churches, that brings together churches across many countries and that often works hand in hand with secular international bodies on social issues.
- v) As Christian para-church organizations that work toward solving social problems.
- vi) As believers who in their daily existence interact with the general public in different spheres of life (work, education, recreation, etc.).

According to Conradie (2011a:24) these manifestations represent the church of Christ and, in all of these manifestations, God's plan for creation has to be fulfilled by all – individually and collectively, as the One Body of Christ. As in a living organism, in the Body of Christ each individual member has to be active just as every part of the body does in the human body (see also Richards and Hoeldtke, 1982:36).

Within the context of the environment, according to Conradie (2011:82), the church is also a *stewarding community*. As the Body of Christ, the community of disciples is being incorporated into the work of the Great Steward. Christians thus become servants and followers of the Suffering Servant. Furthermore, the church is not an end-in-itself. Against the pursuit of ecclesiastical power and ambition, the steward community exists to serve the needs of the world. In all of its manifestations, the church, through its members and ministries, should interact with people of different races, education, responsibilities, political affiliations, business and civil obligations in all spheres of life, including on their use or abuse of creation.

As will be seen later in this study, this understanding of the church and its responsibilities with regard to humanity and creation that Conradie offers have implications for the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod when it comes to the practical operationalisation of ecotheological principles by itself and its members in Malawian society.

### **3.3 Conradie on the (Theological) Faces and Causes of the ecological Crisis**

Behind Conradie's (2011a:2) ecotheological concerns and reflections are four crucial areas that he identifies where Christian piety has often inhibited an environmental ethos, spirituality and praxis. These are:

- i) A lack of clarity regarding the relationship between God and the world, often leading to the image of a transcendent but distant God who is not really involved in the world.



- ii) A view of humanity where a distinction between body and soul or between matter and spirit creates the impression that that which is material, bodily and earthly is less valuable than that which is “spiritual”.
- iii) A notion of salvation that is focused solely on human well-being and which tends to view salvation as redemption *from* the earth and not also *of* the earth.
- iv) An escapist view of human destiny that offers a proverbial “pie in the sky when you die”, something that imagines a heavenly hereafter where Christians will be able to escape from this “earthly vale of tears”.

Conradie is convinced that the impact of the above elements on Christian piety in the past should not be taken lightly, and that any ecotheology will remain shallow if it does not endeavour to respond adequately to the above four points. For this reason, Conradie (2011a:8) insists that with regard to the environmental crisis, Christianity may and should make an important contribution to a more adequate understanding of the role of humanity *vis á vis* nature. At the same time, it requires a critical reassessment of the Christian faith itself. Conradie acknowledges that, especially in recent times, many theologians have affirmed that there is a clear need to transform the Christian faith into *a more ecological faith and Christian theology into an ecological theology*. This includes seeking answers to questions such as who the God is in whom we believe, what that God doing in the world today, and how humanity came to know God and what the role of humanity is towards creation. In short, this would require, according to Conradie (2011a:123), nothing less than an “ecological reformulation” of the whole of Christian doctrine and a review of all aspects of Christian faith.

Conradie also makes it clear that it is not the Bible or Christianity per se, but humanity’s failure to accept the Bible’s core message that lies at the root of the environmental crisis (2011a:81). Humanity has not been obedient to God’s command to be the image of Godself (see also Ball, 2010:172). Polarisation that characterises the discourse on climate change – between East and West, North and South, the consumer class and the poor, (over-)industrialised and so called “developing” economies, “gated” communities and (environmental) refugees, previous and coming generations and the interests of humankind and non-humankind/other kind. In light of this polarisation, Conradie calls for a focus on confession of guilt after one has understood *one’s own* footprints in ecological crisis (see below, with reference to Conradie 2010a).

Conradie (2000:4) also believes that environmental awareness is needed because current global signs of ecological destruction predict a long-term future catastrophe that coming generations will have to face and that will exceed the crisis we face today (Conradie 2008:3). In this sense, despite these signs, and important as they may be, Conradie (2010b:19) is of the opinion that the environmental crisis concerns more than just these signs themselves. It also concerns the dominant and increasingly global economic systems and cultural values that support them and not only much humanity's lack of information on and understanding of how the crisis came to be; it requires a realisation and knowledge of *what its end results will be*.

Conradie acknowledges that the world's affluent nations have played a major role in the crisis (2008:3); they have after all emitted more than their fair share of greenhouse gases. Conradie also acknowledges that among the world's population Africa's impoverished peoples will be the most vulnerable to the impact of the ecological crisis. He summarises the concerns regarding the environmental situation globally in the following five areas (Conradie and Field 2000:91):

- i) Nature (including marine) conservation and the preservation of endangered species and encroaching industrial development.
- ii) Environmental problems that directly affect the lives of people, such as air pollution in townships, not having access to clean water, the spread of infectious diseases, lack of sanitation, et cetera.
- iii) Anxiety about global environmental issues such as ozone depletion, acid rain, global warming, toxic waste, the destruction of rainforests and increased nuclear threats.
- iv) Inadequate health and safety standards.
- v) Increasing global population growth that raises concerns about sufficient land, food, water and energy resources for all inhabitants of the world.

As was explained in Chapter Two, most of the abovementioned negative phenomena have their roots in human activities and to date these were mostly those of countries in the West. Conradie (2008:6) also acknowledges – when commenting on Lynn White's famous critique (1967) of the Jewish/Christian tradition that it had taken the notion on “dominion” to mean the liberty to take from nature whatever and whenever humanity pleases – that these countries have contributed most to humanly-induced climate change, ozone depletion, pollution and exhaustion of natural

resources. These are also the countries where Christianity had been well established for centuries (2011a:6). Although many theologians have, according to Conradie (2005a), since defended Christianity against accusations like those of White's, this indeed shows that the ecological crisis is besides being, for example, a political or socio-economic issue, also a spiritual and a cultural issue.

### **3.4 The Ecological Crisis as a Spiritual and Cultural Issue**

#### ***3.4.1 The Ecological Crisis as Spiritual Crisis: Biblical and Theological Reflections:***

Conradie understands the current global ecological crisis as a spiritual and cultural issue. With regard to the former, he traces ecotheological themes right through the whole of the biblical narrative. Explaining the problem in Christian terms, he begins by relating it to the devastating impact of human sin on society since the fall of humankind (with reference to, e.g., Gen. 3:17-24 and Rom. 3:23) (2005a and 2011a:13, 81). Conradie and Field (2000:39-40) also explain that the Pentateuch begins in Genesis 1 with the dramatic portrayal of God's creation. This narrative regularly notes that God looked at creation, at what God had created, and recognised that it was good. What is important here is that God already recognises the goodness of creation even before the creation of humanity, which makes clear that the goodness of creation is not dependent on the existence of humanity.

When looking at Genesis 2, Conradie notes that God's purpose for creation is portrayed in the account of the fertile and beautiful garden where humans live in fellowship with God and in harmony with the other creatures. This harmony is shattered when Adam and Eve disobey God. The latter in turn results in the distortion of the relationship between God and humanity, between human beings themselves, *and* between humanity and the rest of creation. The Genesis narrative continues to the flood in Genesis 6-9 where God is shown to act by using the forces of nature to punish the sin of humanity. Yet, even in the midst of God's judgment, God graciously saves not only a small group of humans, but also representatives of all animal species who will repopulate the earth. The narrative concludes with a covenant between God and "all that lives on the earth" (Gen. 9:17).

Conradie and Field (2000:39) assert that from Genesis 12 onwards, the narrative of God's dealing with creation narrows its focus to the people of Israel. Here one finds a similar pattern

when God acts to deliver the Israelites from Egypt by using diverse powers of nature. The goal of the exodus is for God to lead God's people into a new land flowing with milk and honey, a land characterised by fertility and abundance. While travelling through the wilderness, God gives the Israelites laws to govern their lives as a nation. These laws regulated not only the relationship between God and God's people and between human beings, but also between people and the rest of creation. It is also noted that the health of the land was provided for, for example, by making provision for sabbatical years (Ex. 23:10-11 and Lev. 25) and even by specific laws concerning the care of plants (Lev. 19:23-25 and Deut. 20:19-20) and animals (Ex. 20:8-11, 23:4, 5, 10-11 and Deut. 22:1-4 and 6-7). The Israelites were warned that a failure to keep these laws would result in them losing the land (Lev. 26:14-45). As such, in the Pentateuch, one finds a covenant relationship that concerns not only God and the people of Israel, but also the land on which the latter live.

Conradie (2000:40) writes that the portrayal of this dynamic interrelationship between human society, the natural world and God is continued in the prophetic literature. Israel's failure to keep the covenant is punished by natural disasters (e.g., in 1 Kings 17 and 18, Isa. 5:8-10, 24:1-6 and Jer. 5:23-25). In Zephaniah 1:2-3, the prophet prophesies that:

I [God] shall utterly destroy everything from the face of the earth, says the Lord. I shall destroy human beings and animals, the birds of the air and the fish of the sea. I shall bring the wicked to their knees and wipe out all people from the earth. This is the word of the Lord.

Those who destroy creation are also subjected to the judgment of God (Hab. 2:17). When judgment falls on the king of Babylon, land and the trees rejoice (Isa. 14:3-8, see also Ps. 98). As the prophets look forward toward the redemption of Israel, they also often describe the natural world as *sharing in that redemption* (e.g., Isa. 11:6-9; 35:1-3, 5-7, Ezek. 36, 47:1-12, and Amos 9:11-15).

According to Conradie (2000:44-45), the relationship between Jesus and the natural world is a less dominant and somewhat ambiguous theme in the Gospels. Yet, Jesus begins his ministry in the company of wild animals in the desert (Mark 1:13), providing a preliminary fulfillment of Isaiah's vision (cf. Isa. 11:6-9). During his lifetime Jesus often leaves the crowds to go into the hills to pray and just before the crucifixion he pours out his soul to his Father in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus' teaching confirms God's care for creatures in the sayings about

the lilies (Matt. 6:28-30) and the sparrows (Matt. 10: 29-31), but Jesus also curses an unfaithful fig tree and condemns a herd of pigs in order to save a man possessed by a demon. According to Conradie (2000:45), it is possible to understand even the latter incidents from an ecological perspective as symbolic acts of judgment. The curse on the fig tree symbolises the judgment of Israel that failed to recognise the time of God's Messiah just as the fig tree failed to respond to with fecundity in the presence of the Messiah. The casting out of demons into the pigs is a dramatic picture of the cleansing of the land of evil powers.

Solving the current environmental crisis, according to Conradie (2005a:2), needs much more than what science and new technologies may offer, or as he puts it: It is less a problem of *know-what* or *know-how* than of *know wherefore*. For Conradie, the global ecological crisis is a pathological sign of spiritual failure and bankruptcy. The problem lies not outside, but inside ourselves; not in the ecosystem, but in the human heart, in humanity's collective psyche. This concerns much more than environmental preservation, it is a profoundly moral problem (Conradie 2011a:13).

In other words, to Conradie (2010b), climate change points in the direction of not merely an economic or ecological crisis but towards a deeper cultural and spiritual crisis that requires moral formation and fundamental moral change. He agrees with Davis (2009:9) that the moral lives of humanity in relation to the ecological crisis presents this generation with the most far-reaching crisis in humanity's life with God. It concerns us precisely as the only creatures (as far as we know), susceptible to moral failure and, unfortunately, the Christian church itself is closely involved with this root cause of the crisis.

Furthermore, according to Conradie (2011a:7-8), part of the problem is that the church focuses almost exclusively on the salvation of the soul resulting in a blind spot and deep silence in the church with regard to the natural environment (cf. 2008). In places this preoccupation within human salvation and the doctrine of divine transcendence, important as they may be, is coupled with an emphasis on human domination over nature and the view that the dismal state of the environment confirms apocalyptic prophecies. That is why Conradie argues that there will be no easy answer to the question of what Christians can do to help eradicate the crisis as Christianity has been as much part of the problem as of the solution (2010c:19).

Humanity has by now been receiving three decades of environmental information especially in the West – outcries, daunting statistics, analyses and programs. The media is

regularly producing stories about environmental disasters. Despite these efforts and although humanity have made some progress internationally on issues such as acid rain and ozone depletion, it has still been unable to turn the tide, especially on the issue of climate change. Environmental degradation has worsened and will probably continue to do so in future.

According to Conradie, in Christian terms, (Conradie 2010c:19-20) the problem of environmental degradation is related to the devastating impact of human sin on society and as such solving the environmental crisis will demand much more than what science and new technologies may offer. He notes (2010b:20): “It indicates that the value underlying our dominant culture and economic practices have become bankrupt.” In short, the fundamental fault thus lies not outside but inside people, not in the ecosystem but in the human heart.

### ***3.4.2 The Ecological Crisis as a Cultural Crisis: Conradie on Consumer Culture***

The Worldwatch Institute (2010:5), referred to in Chapter Two, shows that climate change, air pollution, the average loss of 7 million hectares of forests per year, soil erosion, the annual production of over 100 million tons of hazardous waste and abusive labor practices are all to some extent driven by the desire to produce more and cheaper consumer goods.

Thus, besides the above-mentioned biblical perspectives (and their resultant dogmatic implications) on the natural environment that shows the ecological crisis to be a spiritual issue, the crisis, for Conradie is also a cultural one (2010:19-20). This has to do with the current global consumerist culture. This is not a unique perspective as a wealth of ecotheological thinking in the past decades shows. Tim Cooper (1990:79, 219-220), for example comments that people in industrial societies have become so obsessed with becoming more affluent than they are motivated more by this than by any relationship with God. Christian ethicist Allen Verhey (2002:244-245) points toward the individualistic human tendency to act according to own economic self-interests and to societies’ reliance on the free-market system to direct self-interested economic activity towards societies’ benefit. Verhey notes that this was the vision of Adam Smith in 1776, a vision that economists still follow in capitalist economics. Sally McFague (1993) also bases her ecotheological critique on contemporary American society on its excessively consumerist culture. Well-known German theologian, Jürgen Moltmann (1993:107) asserts that humanity’s denial to work towards a better future for all; to establish “justice, peace and the integrity of creation” here on earth that transcends this life does not necessarily

encourage responsibility for this earth. After all, a culture that assumes that there is nothing more to this life may easily degenerate to an attitude of “eat and drink and be merry, because tomorrow we are dead”. One may then easily become obsessed with overcoming anxieties about human existence and death by accumulating material possessions, frantic pleasure seeking, an unbridled hunger for power and a thirst for recognition through success and admiration (Conyers 1992:164). No wonder theologians such as South African Klaus Nurnberger (1999 305-307) issues an urgent appeal for more ethical and theological reflection on the culture of consumerism, which results from discontentment, overeating, over-satisfaction leading to ill health and unhappiness.<sup>25</sup> Appeals such as this is clearly also responded to by Conradie.

#### *3.4.2.1 Consumerism as Root Cause of the Environmental Crisis*

As was mentioned above, Conradie’s voice is one among several scholars, including theologians, who are convinced that consumerism is the root cause of the environmental crisis. To understand Conradie’s critique of consumerism and its ecological impact his *Christianity and a Critique of Consumerism* (2009) is a primary source. In it Conradie (2009:12, see also 2008:50) critiques consumerism on the following six points:

- 1) “Consumer society is not sustainable.” In other words, while societies continuously work toward expanding their economies, this cannot be sustained as the earth and its resources are finite.
- 2) “Consumerism exacerbates injustice.” Consumerism promotes economic inequality and unequal lifestyles.
- 3) “The affluent have become the victims of their own desires.” From a sociological and psychological perspective, the pervasive influence of consumerism has had a severe impact on the health and lifestyles of the affluent themselves.

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<sup>25</sup> Klaus Nürnberger observes that human beings are creatures that have material needs which include needs of space, energy, food, rest, shelter, clothing, etc. (1999:20). The availability of these resources should not be taken for granted; they must be protected and in consuming these resources there is a need for balance among humans globally. But humanity, as Nurnberger (1999:27) asserts, has utilized human interagency and an easily changing of human body to reach a level of power over its environment that goes well beyond its immediate needs for collective survival. Nürnberger identifies two ways in which economic imbalance has emerged: (a) humans have developed and are utilizing more and better technology and become more and more efficient in their exploitation of nature, (b) humans have increased their resources at the expense of fellow human beings and also of the future generations, selfishly consuming much more than others.



- 4) “Consumerism undermines virtue and breeds vices.” From the perspective of virtue ethics, consumerism encourages the worst in human beings: greed, hoarding, envy, covetousness, pleasure-seeking and pride as opposed to the virtues of wisdom, simplicity, frugality and care.
- 5) “The consumer society commercialises cultural and religious practices.” Commercialisation leads to a shallow engagement with almost everything, including, for example, human sexuality, education and employment. In theological terms, commercialisation leads to consumerism and “consumerism amounts to idolatry”.

The above points will be returned to in more detail below. However, what may be noted already is that, according to Conradie, in light of his ideological and theological critique, consumerism challenges almost every single aspect of the Christian faith. It is indeed *the* ideology of our time; it is a religion that is winning converts more quickly than any previous belief system in human history. The consumption of commodities has led to behavioural patterns applied to wide range of cultural expressions like education, sports events, human sexuality, art, therapy, entertainment ... and religion. In principal, according to Conradie, one should not deny the fact that modern science and technology has benefited human beings worldwide and in many ways, for example, in extending life spans by a generation or even more! Conradie reveals that some even feel that consumerism has the capacity to unite people all over the world within a common consumer culture and for this reason some disapprove of criticising its (consumerism’s) expansion.

However, for Conradie, a moderation of consumerism is important precisely because it is necessary. People need to consume resources in order to survive, but this has to be done in moderation. And, the poorest section of the world’s population needs to consume more because they need to lead more dignified lives. Yet, even the poor need to know how much is enough. In short, Conradie makes it clear that too little consumption leads to starvation and too much consumption leads to “constipation”.

#### *3.4.2.2 Consumer Society, and Consumer Class and (Sustainable) Development*

Consumption takes place on the basis of property rights, an owners’ right to use and dispose of his or her material goods. Conradie (2009:14) describes societies where the average level of consumption is relatively high in terms of the consumption of electricity, raw materials, housing,



consumption of animal products, transport, et cetera as *consumer societies* and those that consume in such excess the *consumer class*. Globally, the consumer class account for up to 86% of private consumption while the poorest fifth of the world's human population account for only 1%. The operating force in these classes of consumers is called consumerism and it is a cultural orientation, which at times is a force of hope, expectations and aspirations of the poor and the lower-middle classes of the world (17).

Conradie asks whether a consumer society be sustained by its limited home (earth)? Clearly it cannot as economic and development growth has not kept pace with consumer lifestyles. Part of the problem is that economic growth and market expansion mostly only serve the interests powerful corporations and is driven by market-oriented forces (21). Development – even so-called “sustainable development” – and development aid often have an environmentally destructive impact and globally very little has changed overall to bridge the gap between the affluent in the centres of economic power and the impoverished on the economic periphery (21).

The role played by international institutions such as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and World Trade Organization and by instruments such as Structural Adjustment Program and trade barriers have, in fact, sometimes made it harder for poorer nations to participate in the global economy in a way that may build up their people and local communities. This seems far removed from former US Secretary of the Treasury Henry Morgenthau's view in 1944 that “Creation of a dynamic world economy in which the people of every nation will be able to realise their potentialities in peace and enjoy increasingly the fruits of material progress on an earth infinitely blessed with natural resources” (quoted in Coward and Maguire 2000:29).

Conradie understands that the aim of the above institutions and instruments has been to bring sustainable development to developing nations. However, the result has not been growth, but decline. Even when wealth was successfully created for some, poverty for many more was increasing more rapidly. The “underdeveloped” world is not “catching up” with the developed world. This is because nations that are economically powerful do have all the opportunities to own land and goods and to transform any kind of resource for their own benefit as well as dictating prices on the market (Coward and Maguire 2000:68). As a result the gap between the rich and the poor is growing wider, rather than narrowing.

Conradie notes that some world bodies have replaced the term “sustainable development” to “improving the quality of human life”, but that it still means that development is needed and

any development leads to an increase in the amount of resources required. As a result, Conradie (2009:27) comments, the natural ability of the earth to accommodate over population and waste products threatens the capacity of the ecosystem and earth's biosphere itself. As Conradie explains, for example, the carrying capacity<sup>26</sup> of carbon dioxide of the earth amounts to about two tonnes per person per year, yet the global average is 4.5 tons per person per year. This signifies the collapse of integrity of the ecosystems supporting lifestyles of societies as well as that of the ability of societies to respond appropriately to warning signals that the carrying capacity of the land and sky is being exceeded.

### *3.4.2.3 Consumerism and Economic Injustice*

The culture of consumerism has resulted in economic injustice. Conradie (2009:38ff.) comments that what the world has now is enough for the world population, but what is needed is a just and equal distribution of world's wealth. However, what is happening at the economic centres as opposed to global economic peripheries<sup>27</sup> is that affluent nations in the so-called First World

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<sup>26</sup> Marsh and Grossa (1996:4) describe this carrying capacity as the number of people the earth can support, defined by size of the population that can live in a long-term, sustained balance with the environment

<sup>27</sup> Nürnberger (1999:45-46) summarises some differences between economic centers and peripheries: (a) In the center there is highly-differentiated and integrated economies while on the periphery nothing is found but subsistence agriculture and only one or two export products such as coffee or copper. (b) In the center, capital tends to accumulate rapidly and the productivity of labor rises, while on the periphery there is very little capital accumulation and productivity of labor is very low. (c) In the center, infrastructure (like telecommunication, transport facilities, financial institutions, water and electricity) is highly developed, while on the periphery infrastructure is poorly developed. (d) In the center there are high levels of entrepreneurial initiative, technological sophistication and organisational expertise. There are also large markets for skilled labor. Educational and specialised training facilities are well developed to cater for these needs. On the periphery, there is little incentive to develop economic initiative. Poorly-developed economies do not require high levels of sophistication and a lack of funds prevents the provision of training facilities. (e) In the center, one has to compete with others, so the pace of life tends to be hectic – especially for those at the helm of economic enterprises time is a precious resource that is utilized intensively. On the other hand, high levels of productivity, union action and social policies have provided urban workers with more leisure time after a hectic day at work. On the periphery, while there is mostly a more relaxed atmosphere, people often have long working hours. (f) One can see flourishing consumer markets for goods and services in the centers because more people have purchasing power. While on the periphery, there is not much cash around and expectations are not aroused by the urban glitter. As a result, consumer markets are poorly developed. (This point will be taken up with regard to Malawi in Chapter Five of this study.) (g) In the center the average living standard of living is fairly high but there are also great discrepancies in income between affluent and the poor. On the periphery people tend to have relatively equal, but very low income. (h) The center is usually not only more developed in terms of industry and commerce, but also in terms of agricultural production. Part of the reason for this

consume way too much when compared to impoverished, so-called “Third World” nations. Conradie feels that this high consumption is directly related to climate change, various forms of pollution, waste and the unsustainable use of resources. He points out that population growth, deforestation, desertification and the depletion of wildlife resources are typically related to a context of poverty. However, the poor do this as a way of daily survival because they are being oppressed in terms of production, distribution and consumption of resources. The worst affected human victims of environmental degradation are the victims of social-economic injustice namely women, children, the poor, mine workers, factory workers, farm workers, and people of colour. Ironically, on the other hand, the consumer class itself later becomes the victims the consumer culture.

#### *3.4.2.4 The Victimizing Effects of the Consumerist Lifestyle*

Consumerist tendencies in both rich and poor nations are mainly dictated by producers and marketers through marketing and advertising campaigns. These producers and marketers work toward convincing consumers of the existence of desires that they (the former) may fulfil in order to increase their business. In this process the role of the media and advertising are central as Conradie also points out (2009:52). Conradie identifies four central messages or “hopes” in these advertisements:

- i. Happiness is to be found through consumption of material goods.
- ii. It is better to have new goods than old ones.
- iii. Everyone and not just the affluent elite can enjoy the fruits of consumption-driven desire.
- iv. Money is the primary measure of value in the society.

Wealth among the consumer classes have, as Conradie (53) puts it, paved the way for the emergence of “culture of contentment”. The latter is normally tied up with the protection of financial interests, political power, the control of the media and military security – as, for example, in countries like the United States of America. However, changes are also emerging in many other cultures. According to Conradie (53-54), these changes are even visible in terms of

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phenomenon is that on periphery “cities exist to serve the farms”, while in centers “farms exist to serve the cities”. The closer one gets to the city the more intensive and productive agriculture becomes.

urban infrastructure like the revamping of industrial areas, elaborate highways, ubiquitous shopping centres and sports arenas.

However, these lifestyles are victimising the very consumer classes in a psychological way. Conradie (59) calls the hardships faced by such class of people a “psychological form of cancer”. In order to maintain their lifestyles, people have to work extra hard, but because they have more, they have to increase personal security and the security of their possessions, they have the burden of “keeping up with the Jones’s”, an addiction to luxuries, lack of satisfaction that consumerism brings and the experience of having more but enjoying less. What is thus needed is to distinguish between wealth and well-being, between standard of living and levels of income or of consumption:

It is indeed liberating to realise that well-being is something other than being well-off. Quality of life is more important than quantity of stuff and that the best things in life are actually free: love, friendship, fresh air, a healthy body, walking for exercise. ... [I]n consumer culture, ‘everything can be auctioned’. ... [Things of] “high” cultural value such as marital love, family life and friendship are undermined by consumer choices because a high standard of living requires a dual income [and] the quality time available for families to be together is reduced (59).<sup>28</sup>

Theologically speaking, God’s love among his people, created in God’s image, is being replaced by the love of goods in a consumer-cultured society. According to Conradie (59), the value of a range of human relationships is being undermined in the name of consumer freedom, consumer choice, autonomy, pleasure and happiness. To have a successful career in a consumer society, says Conradie, is regarded as more important than being a kind and loving person, a good spouse, a parent and a neighbour. People are no longer valued for what they *are* but in terms of what they can *add* to the company and its profits. What follows then a privatising and a relativising of moral and spiritual values that may lead to a fragmentation of the structures and

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28 Cf. Church of Sweden (2008:67): “Life is about more than production and consumption: it is not about having more, but being more.”

institutions that support relationships such as marriage, family life, community organisations and friendships (60).

In consumer societies people are not able to differentiate between basic needs and consumerist desire and, again, it is not easy to know when enough is enough. Failure to distinguish between needs, wants, desires and failure to recognise that there also exist sincere human needs for beauty, for love, and for joy will always make people in the consumer class “struggle to make ends meet”. Conradie (65) asserts that as a result, leisure is treasured above work, spending is above thrift and immediate gratification above deferred gratification. Worse still, as Conradie points out, consumerism undermines the four cardinal virtues of wisdom, justice, courage and temperance. Conradie comments that in some Christian traditions, because greed is the rapacious craving for more goods or wealth than one need or deserves and therefore enslaves people and destroys communities, it is rightly regarded as one of the mortal sins.

Conradie (67) therefore speaks of the role of “mimetic desire” in consumer behaviour, when one desires a consumer object not for the object itself but merely because another person desires it. Conradie explains how much mimetic desire leads to exponential and unsustainable patterns of consumption. Accordingly, the luxuries of today become the necessities of tomorrow and for this reason Conradie describes marketing and advertisements as “an organised creation of dissatisfaction”.

Conradie (2010:69-71) furthermore asserts that advertisements in their sheer numbers entice vices such as greed among children. Advertisements are where children receive their cosmology, their basic grasp of the world’s meaning, which amounts to their primary religious faith, though unrecognised as such. The fact that consumerism has become the dominant world-faith is largely invisible to us. It is therefore helpful to understand clearly that to hand over our children to the consumer culture is to place them in the care of the planet’s most sophisticated religious preachers – advertisement spokespersons. Advertisements are a form of seduction; it magnifies and intensifies craving; it brutalises human desires and exacerbates economic injustice:

In 1994, just as an example, the United States spent far more on advertisement than on all higher education-\$147 billion and worldwide, \$450 billion is spent annually on advertisement, enough to end hunger and to create employment for everyone who is able to work (71).

Furthermore, much marketing is based on controlling women's bodies and sexuality so that commodities may sell. In short, advertisement has led to depersonalisation within many societies by use of eloquent experts.

Conradie (72) does not deny that as humans we have legitimate desires. Indeed, desire is not in itself problematic, comments Conradie. One would want to praise the desire to do what is right. Desire is a function of human orientation towards the future and requires imagination, fantasy, daydreaming, and longing something better. However, these can easily become distorted in the form of greed, overindulgence, sexual promiscuity and hedonism. To want something can merely be an expression of the altogether human desire to improve one's circumstances. In short, what is problematic is the *consumerist* desire, especially when it becomes religion in itself. Conradie (73) asserts that consumer culture is actually not geared towards the satisfaction of desire, but towards the continuous *stimulation* of desire. Conradie (75) argues that in Christianity, Christians have the desire for God and vice versa, but God cannot be turned into a commodity. For Christians, it is important to realise that *well-being* is something different from *being-well-off*; standards of loving different from standards of living and much of this has to do with understanding the virtue of simplicity (77).

#### 3.4.2.5 Consumerism Breeds Vice as Opposed to Virtues of Simplicity and Frugality

According to Conradie, in the Christian discourse on consumerism, the virtues of simplicity and frugality features strongly as bases for an alternative lifestyle. He, too, encourages a move away from an attitude of "shop-till-you-drop" to one of "dropping shopping". The affluent especially need to learn the simpler lifestyle reflected in Ecclesiastes 9:7-9; a lifestyle that assumes that basic human needs for food, drink, clothing and companionship are met.

The Worldwatch Institute expressly states that a reluctance to reduce standards of living in affluent societies is one of the major reasons for the current state of the global environment (2010:174). The Institute, therefore, suggests that in rich societies, for example, the advances in labour productivity should be traded for more free time instead of creating additional purchasing power.

According to Conradie (2008:57) a new (old) set of values, rooted in the gospel of Jesus, should render hope and energy for action. With reference to John 10:10, Conradie shows that the vision of abundant life portrayed by Jesus of Nazareth is based neither on the extravagance of the

affluent, nor on the ascetic ethos of desert monasticism. He reminds one that both John the Baptist and Jesus fasted, notwithstanding their commitment and ministry to the poor and the marginalised (78). Likewise, he says, the symbols of bread and wine in the Holy Communion do not point to a consumerist over-indulgence but they do allow for celebration. This is the simple lifestyle reflected in the Christian virtues of moderation, temperance and self-control. The Christian gospel in no way promotes a disdain for that which is earthly, bodily, or material; it affirms the value of creation and finds joy in life and the many gifts that support life. The Christian religion, according to Conradie (2010:127), in fact is “the most materialistic of all religions” because it takes matter as good and worships a God that entered the world in human flesh in Christ Jesus. The Church is also described as the *Body* of Christ, and Christians are called to consume the Word as well as to be consumed by the Word. A retrieval of the Christian virtue of simplicity would, according to Conradie, emphasise the inner freedom that liberates one from the devouring desire to hoard possessions, to consume and to control.

For Conradie, a retrieval of the virtue of simplicity in consumer society also entails a new appreciation of human limitations (78) and that human finitude has to be understood within the context of planetary limits and the limits to economic growth. Conradie calls for a “theology of finitude” and also a sense of “satisfaction” (i.e., a sense of knowing when one has had enough). This also implies a sense of contentment and fulfilment besides a sense of recognition of what is enough.

Conradie is convinced that more than a mere psychological mustering of one’s will power will be required to alter consumption patterns (80). Structural changes have to be taken into consideration (rising inequality, threats to job security, the role of the mass media, and the decline of communities). Conradie believes that people will be willing to support changes in legislation that are beneficial to the environment, even if it comes at some cost to themselves but with the benefit clean air and clean water.

According to some commentators, calls for simplified lifestyles may lead to economic stagnation and widespread unemployment, even the collapse of economies based on the production of consumer goods. However, according to Conradie (80), this will only be the case if personal spending is not reduced in order to give more to people in need, who will then spend the money instead of few individuals. Thus, calls for a simpler lifestyle may also be based on altruistic motives and this is especially well aligned with Christian views:



The rich must live more simply so that the poor may simply live. The only way to make the poor richer is to make the rich poorer. The earth satisfies the needs of all, but not the greed of those bent on insane consumption (80).

#### *3.4.2.6 Consumerism Encourages the Commodification of Culture and Religion*

A culture of consumerism is often also reflected in its commoditisation of culture, values, religion and beliefs. What is emphasised on the label of the products we buy, says Conradie, is often a promise of what we will become after consuming the specific commodity; in short, we are converted to a “commodity gospel”.

Whether consumable commodities on supermarket shelves or, for example, courses offered at institutions learning, one has to search for affordable, quick and attractive product (Conradie 2009:86). In a similar way, human bodies have now been turned into sexual commodities as never before through pornography and prostitution. The body serves as a utility to market other commodities (where satisfaction is implicitly promised but never realised) and as a result it may even render legitimacy to violence against women (88). Sex becomes a sport where tenderness is replaced by certain techniques that have to be mastered and where the quality of human relationships is sacrificed for the sake of erotic pleasures which ultimately fail to satisfy the human need for intimacy (88).

In the advertising culture and tradition, work and careers are also commoditised. In a consumer culture work is a commodity that must preferably be meaningful and exciting – certainly not boring. Work becomes a form of consumption on top of being a form of production instead of a source of earning a living and a responsibility from God (with reference to Genesis 2:15).

With this zeal to commoditising everything, it is also evident in the commercialization of public space. People’s deepest personal connections are increasingly dominated by market transactions, whether it is through surrogate motherhood, the sale of one’s DNA, the booming trade in sex or the commercialisation of religion and spirituality (89). Little remains sacred and separate from the world of the commodities. As a result people become even more desperate to sacralise the profane consumer world around them, worshipping celebrities, collections and brand logos. People even commodify themselves through magazines or television (one may just think here of so-called reality TV) (cf. Conradie, 2010:93).



Religion has not escaped this commodification. Conradie (2010:93) quotes Miller as saying that religious products are available on the “market” of ideas together with other cultural products. In the same way, those other products become disconnected from production processes, religious beliefs become disconnected from communities and their practices that sustain such beliefs. Elements of religious traditions are fragmented into discrete, free-floating signifiers abstracted from their interconnections with other doctrines, symbols and practices. This abstraction of elements from their traditions weakens their ability to impact the concrete practices of daily life. People simply apply the consumer practices that they have acquired in the dominant culture to religious products.

This is also true of some Christian practises. Quoting CS Lewis, Conradie, for example, refers to the way people may employ the consumer practices in their choice of a particular church. They select a church that will cater for their needs, where they find their preferred mode of worship and where they can associate with people with whom they feel at home. They become connoisseurs of churches, who can judge churches in terms of their ability to satisfy emotional needs; they “pick and pray” in a similar way to which they “pick and pay”!

Unfortunately, some churches have also commoditised themselves as a way of responding to the wishes of the religious consumers; they have become vendors of religious services and goods. Driven by commodity-orientated competition with other churches, they hope to offer the best goods in a more digestible form than their “competitors”; the clergy become the sales representatives of the church, the gospel and church doctrines; various ministries are its products and proclaim its marketing techniques.

### **3.5 Preliminary Conclusion: Consumerism as Idolatry**

Conradie (2010:111) comes to the conclusion that consumerism, on top of being criticised in terms of its consequences for human beings and the environment, may also be described as “the ideology of our times” and a “civil religion” – a very successful one at that. Market capitalism is becoming the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe more and more tightly into a worldview and set of values whose religious role we overlook only because we insist on seeing them as secular (2010:112).

As such, consumerism amounts to a form of idolatry as it promotes the worship of the body, pleasure, excitement, money, et cetera. And, people are willing to make sacrifices in line with this idolatry in terms of rest, recreation, joy and prayer. Even if they manage to place God somewhere into the scheme of things, God is treated as one of many goods. Conradie (114) refers to Wagner's term "money pantheism" to describe the way in which Mammon turns everything else into a means towards the ultimate end of obtaining more and more money, power, status and pleasure. In this way, Mammon becomes an end in itself, an omniscient and almighty god, the origin of everything of value (115). People are robbed of their time with and for the true God (116) and are relegated to a lives of inner spiritual emptiness, not only in North America or Europe, but also in countries such as South Africa, Namibia, South Korea, the Philippines, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Guatemala.

### **3.6 Towards a Theological Critique of and Solutions to Consumerism:**

What may correct this situation is the idea of alternative vision so that consumerist culture will be handled with proper understanding of what earth means for humanity. According to Conradie (2009:216), if individuals could see the results of their own ecological and consumerist footprints, personal lifestyles may change. Like other people, Christians have the opportunity to influence changes in lifestyles at home, at work, in local communities, at national and global level. Politically, there is a need for political leadership (also in Africa) that love, fear and obey God more than their political positions and wealth.

Conradie (216) also points out that just sustainability must always be linked with God's providence because justice is associated with God's merciful judgement of human lives and societies. Theologically, peace is an eschatological concept associated with hope for the consummation of God's work. Of course (39), affluent nations should drastically reduce greenhouse emissions while availability of employment among the poor people will reduce over population. But, an important way of reducing environmental degradation is to influence the hearts of people and to make them aware of the interconnectedness of all people and people and nature at large; to make them aware of the need to also do justice to the ecology. There is a need for an "inter-locking web of concern" about the earth's carrying capacity, its ability to support the lives of its inhabitants and the human family's ability to live together in harmony. All have to strive toward the rejection of rampant consumerism and competitive greed and selfishness in the

global market systems. People should advocate sufficient production of wealth, more equitable distribution of wealth and the reinterpretation of the very concept of wealth and the meaning of “enough”. As Conradie has been pointing out, if the main problem is spiritual, then spiritual solutions should also be sought. He suggests four specific spiritual/theological solutions:

### *3.6.1. The Importance of God Concepts*

Conradie refers to some terms used with reference to the global market that actually sound like biblical terms (2009:124). He speaks of the emergence of “God concepts” within the logic of the market society that seems to justify the logic of the market, including exclusive property rights, the accumulation of capital, the need for wage labour and human acquisitiveness. While desire, hunger, wants and needs spelled trouble for humans in pre-modern times, needs are today seen as the energiser to vitality, productivity and success. The human project is seen as the progressive, mutual meeting of human needs. An acquisitive orientation forms the presupposition and guarantees the unlimited growth of the economy.<sup>29</sup>

According to Conradie, humanity is now living in a “full world”. God as the One who has no needs, the One who is able to decide without constraint (God’s sovereignty) and who is infinite (God’s infinity). For many this functionally reflects the notion that, “the consumer is king” (113). Once a human need can be identified, there is an immediate justification for meeting such a need, irrespective of how extravagant it may be. Accordingly, consumers are portrayed as independent, sovereign and legitimately insatiable. Conradie refers to Meeks’ reference to the Christian portrayal of the triune God as “the Economist”, which emphasises the fullness of God’s blessings and the gift of the Holy Spirit over against notions of scarcity and human needs. God’s provision of abundant manna in the wilderness in the Exodus narratives, for some makes the threat of scarcity as foundation for economics intolerable. However, the Israelites did not have unlimited desires as do members of consumer society in what Graham Ward calls an “economy of lack” (quoted in Conradie 2009:124). People “no longer consume to live but they live to consume. For them, things lose value because they value them too much” (125). An opposing view would be that, when things are received as gifts from God and used obediently in service to

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<sup>29</sup> No wonder Coward and Maguire (2000:31) warns that humanity has crossed a monumental historic threshold. They say that because of fivefold economic expansion since 1950, the environmental demands of our economic system now fill the total available environmental space on the planet.

God; gratitude and contentment lies not in obtaining things you want, but in giving thanks for what you have.

### 3.6.2 *Repentance*

When humans know that their lifestyles and actions toward each other and creation are against God's will the best thing is to approach God in humility, to acknowledge one's guilt,<sup>30</sup> to beg for God's forgiveness, and to seek alternatives to environmentally harmful actions (cf. Conradie, 2008:81-82). Humanity has indeed destroyed God's creation for selfish ends as it thinks that the universe was created solely for its benefit. However, to imagine that God has created the whole universe solely for human use and pleasure is a mark of folly. Repentance is what is required if things are to change for humanity and creation, as Conradie (2009:20) puts it: "what is required is an act of repentance on our part and a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another and the world around us within the perspective of the divine design for creation."

### 3.6.3. *Changed Attitudes toward Creation*

After repentance the church should speak in the language of a theology of ecology which will reach the repentant hearts towards renewal. According to Conradie (2009:20) this will lead to a renewed attempt to view oneself, others *and creation* from the perspective of the divine design for creation. A solution at the economic and technological level can be found only if we undergo,

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30 In discussing confessing guilt in South Africa, comparing it to German analogies, Conradie (2010a) cites the famous analysis by Karl Jaspers of four different types of guilt in his *Die Schuldfrage* (1946): *Criminal guilt* – where those guilty of criminal acts during the war (Germany World war II) could be tried and punished in court of law. But with climate change, Conradie suggests that those emitting much greenhouse gases need to refrain from it and promote policies that would be more sustainable. *Political guilt* – which follows from the failure of citizens to exercise their responsibility to participate in decision making processes, but which excludes those who resisted the political system publically and courageously (for example, under apartheid in South Africa). In the environmental discourse, Conradie refers it to the church failing to exercise its prophetic role and responsibility given by God to care and tend the earth. *Moral guilt* – in the more general sense that people are responsible for what they do and what they have left undone by conveniently closing their eyes; by failing to intervene; by allowing themselves to become indoctrinated; by being seduced to follow their own interests to the detriment of others or as a result of the fear of disobeying instructions. In line with this Conradie indicates that individual Christians need to have sense of shame of their ecological detrimental past and commitment towards the future. *Metaphysical guilt* – which describes the very sense of being human and our common humanity which also makes us co-responsible for structural injustices in society. Those who survived World War II and apartheid oppression while others were killed and suffered oppression were guilty by virtue of their very existence. This applies to the church among affluent nations who are enjoying the results of environmental exploitation while their fellow Christians in the poor nations are suffering its consequences.

in the most radical way, an inner change of heart, which can lead to a change in lifestyle. Conradie emphasises that a genuine conversion in Christ will enable us to change the way we think and act towards everything. For the church to act better, it has to first look at the impact of all what is happening around it. Conradie (57) comments that the church cannot address consumerism without recognising the impact of consumerism on creation, society and itself. Such consumerism can only be addressed on the basis of an alternative form of spirituality. Christians are part of the crisis, contributors to it, yet they are also part of its victims. And, Christians with a large carbon footprint face should Christians with a small carbon footprint across the table of international discourse on climate change and environmental degradation (cf. Conradie, 2011a:301). But also on a different level, Conradie (2011c:162) calls on the church as local congregation: “to prove that it is concerned with environmental crisis, before getting deeply involved in environmental projects ... to get its own house in order.” Ecotheology should first be preached and taught in church so that its church members should view creation differently and acknowledge the interdependence of humans and nature before it indulges in criticising environmental destructors.

Especially important in the context of this study is Conradie’s view that the understanding of environmental threats may help the church to check and balance *what is involved in culture and tradition of any specific group of people*. As has been said already, for Conradie (2005a:1), ecotheology is an attempt to retrieve the ecological wisdom in Christianity as a response to environmental threats and injustice. At the same time it is an attempt to reinvestigate, rediscover and renew the Christian tradition in the light of the challenges posed by the environmental crisis.

### **3.7 The Church’s Unique Theological Resources for Addressing the Ecological Crisis**

One important characteristic of the Christian church within the discourse ecotheology is, as Conradie asserts, its strong eschatological briefs (2009:107). It unapologetically advocates a better future for other world, making it a better home to live in. Conradie (2005:184) calls the earth God’s house. While God has established the church on earth and it is waiting for the coming world, its current home has to be cared for. God has invited humans, together with other species in God’s household, to tend and keep the house and to guard against evils in it such as of injustice, suffering, oppression, hatred and conflict but also environmental degradation. The

church also has a duty to address all of these ills. What the world needs is nothing but the gospel itself through churches' theological resources. But what are these theological resources?

Conradie (2011c) discusses seven spiritual "stations" towards the sanctification of the whole earth, movements from one "station" to another, and here *culture* may also be a resource when looked at through the lens of Christian theology (this will form the focus of the following chapter).

### *3.7.1 From Spiritualising Denial to Prophetic Critique*

Conradie describes the warnings as to the seriousness of environmental threats by scientists over the past few decades, as well their dismay at and anger because of the limited resources to address it, concerns over sustainable development, over environmental injustice and the collapse of ecosystems. He laments the relative silence from faith communities on the subject and the fact that, when the silence is broken it is sometimes not very helpful (2011c:156-170). Evangelical Christians, for example, sometimes show a denial of the situation by favouring a spiritualising dualism of "heaven" as being more important than the earth and God's salvation in Jesus Christ more important than God's creation. Sometimes it is felt that, since the Second Coming of Jesus is immanent and this in any case implies the destruction of the world as we know it, why should there be any need to care for the earth now?<sup>31</sup>

What is needed is for churches and Christians to act as stewards of creation without dominating it. They should fulfil a prophetic role in making people aware of the dire circumstances in which the environment finds itself. As such, while critics criticise, prophets weep while instructing, they position themselves in solidarity with the victims, but also accept the implication of their own judgments.

### *3.7.2. From Stewardship to Priestly Environmental Projects*

Conradie (2011c:160) asserts that on top of being stewards of God's creation, local churches have to embark on social and environmental projects. In many African countries, churches are

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<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately this is the kind of message one often finds in churches and church documents, even inadvertently. One example is the Nkhoma Synod's popular song in its hymn book that reads: "*kwathu sipadziko ndingopitirira ndadzikudzikira chuma kumwambako, mngero akodola pakhomo lamwamba, ndipo dziko lapamsi sindiyesa kwathu...*" (This world is not my home and I have banked my wealth there in heaven, and an angel is calling me on the gates of heaven, therefore I do not take this world as my home).

sometimes the *only* suitable institution to address a variety of social needs and are recognised for their leadership, some infrastructure, networks, regular meetings and volunteers. In Africa, the church also enjoys the added advantage of the trust of people at grassroots level.

### 3.7.3. *From Local Churches to Sustainable Communities*

According to Conradie (2011c:162), even before a local congregation involves itself in environmental projects, it has to get its own house in order. As the local congregation also represents a social community, it has to become a *sustainable* community. It has to understand its own environmental footprint, how environmentally friendly or not its buildings are its electricity use, transportation, paper use, its investments and the activities of its members. Conradie points out that responsible stewardship of all material resources and possessions is required for the local congregation to become a model of a sustainable community.

### 3.7.4. *From Community to Holy Communion – Liturgy and the Life of the Laity*

Christians confess to “believe God the Father, the Maker of heavens and Earth”, but this says nothing about God’s creation *on* earth. Conradie (2011c:160) encourages churches and local congregations to include in their liturgy – also and especially in that of Holy Communion – reflections on the environment. They may include feasts such as the annual environment day, as they sometimes remember in their liturgy those living with HIV and AIDS, with disability, studying for the ministry, et cetera. It is within this context where Christians may learn what consumption means through the sharing of bread and wine. This is the place where the rich and the poor come together at the same table in order to share the Word of God, their bread, their life stories, and their joys and sorrows. Church members will be reminded in this way to also look at nature through with different eyes as liturgy helps Christians to talk about God on the basis of their experiences of the world/creation (2011c:162). This can take place through worship, preaching, praying, and teaching. According to Conradie, the liturgy is *the* place where people learn anew to recognise God, to challenge their images of God and to act on it in their stewardship, mission, in development, and in social transformation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Conradie and Field (2000: 82-88) even offers the the following sample of an “eco-liturgy”: (i) An Opening prayer: Read Ps. 24:1. (ii) Worship and hymns of praise: Read Ps. 148:7-13; Ps. 19. (iii) The reading of God’s law: (In many Christian congregations God’s law is regularly read during the service, Nkhoma Synod included!); Read from the Pentateuch: Ex. 20:8-11; 23:10-12;



### 3.7.5. *From the Liturgy of Life to Discerning the Church's Unique Role in the World*

For Conradie (2011c:162), the church has to contribute to social services in addition to spiritual nourishment of its members. Social issues like moral regeneration, education, health and community service are some of the issues that should be on the church's agenda. If people were to see the world through the eyes of God, they would recognise how precious the earth is to God. Conradie (2009:128) observes that the symbol of the cross signifies that God regards the world as good and beautiful, so precious, in fact, that it is worth dying for. The cross of Jesus Christ is God's claim to this world, the claim of a lover yearning to love and to be loved, not the claim of a despot yearning for power, control and glory.

## 3.8 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the ecotheological thought of Ernst Conradie, first with reference to his understanding of the six manifestations of the church which set the stage for where and in which ways churches, such as the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod, may become involved in the discourse on the environmental crisis. This was followed by an overview of Conradie's views of the faces and causes of the ecological crisis. One very important fact that followed from this discussion is his conviction that the ecological crisis is much more than an environmental/economic/political crisis, but that it is in the first instance a *spiritual and also a cultural crisis*. In his most recent

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Lev. 19:23-25; 25:26; Num. 35:2-5, 33-34; Deut. 8:7-20; 11:1-15; 28:1-24; The warnings of the prophets: Isa. 24:1-6. (iv) The Ten Commandments: e.g. Thou shall not act in any way which makes the world less able to sustain life, and so on. (v) Confession of faith. (Some contemporary confessions of faith include clauses on creation and our responsibility towards it, e.g. the "Declaration of faith" of the PCUSA). (vi) Sermons: Reading the Bible through ecologically sensitive eyes. E.g.: (a) The Pentateuch Gen. 1; 2; 6-9; 9:17; Ex. 23:10-11; Lev. 19 Law of Sabbathical Year; Lev. 19:23-25; Deut. 20:19-20 laws for plants protection; Ex. 20:8-11, 23:4; 5, 10-11, Deut. 22:1-4; 6-7 laws for animal protection; Lev. 26:14-45 laws to warn people that failure to keep these laws would result in them being thrown out of the land. (b) The Prophetic Books (e.g. 1 Kings 17-18, Isa. 5:8-10, 24:1-6, Jer. 5:23-25, Zeph. 1:2-3; Hab. 2:17; the natural world sharing in human redemption in Isa. 11:6-9, 35:1-7, Ezek. 36: 47:1-12; Amos 9:11-15. (c) Wisdom Literature Job 38:41; Ps. 19:1-4, 104; (iv) The Gospels: Jesus begins his ministry in the company of wild animals in the desert (Mark 1:13); Mt. 6: 28-30, 10:29-31 (v) The Letters of Paul: Rom. 8:18-23; Col. 1:15-23; 1 Cor. 15; Eph. 1. (vi) The Gospel of John and the Book of Revelation: The Gospel of John beginning with a description of God's purpose for all creation in a manner that echoes Genesis 1; The Book of Revelation's portrayal of the purpose of God in salvation as including all of creation. Revelation 4 and 5 describing the ultimate worship of God in which "all created things in heaven, on earth, under the earth and in the sea joins"; harmonious living between God, humanity and creation as pictured in Rev. 21 and 22.



work, it was shown that Conradie sees this spiritual and cultural crisis manifesting itself most clearly and most importantly in the global threat and reality of consumerist culture. The discussion of this culture from a theological perspective was followed by an exposition of Conradie's theological critique as well as suggestions for addressing the threat posed to the environment and to humanity by this culture. In this way many of the broader ecotheological principles that characterise Conradie's thought were also identified.

In short, Conradie (2009) himself summarises his critique of and solutions for the threat of environmentally-destructive consumerism as:

- i. If we focus on the environmental impact of consumerism, lifestyles will change as it will make us conscious of human and environmental limitations and finitude.
- ii. If we focus on economic injustice brought by consumer culture then distributive justice will follow.
- iii. If we focus on consumerism's impact on the lives of consumer class and those who aspire to become part of it, then an answer will be looked for in order to rearrange social structures and projects where alternative values may be pursued and where real needs will be distinguished from presumed needs.
- iv. If we focus on consumerism's impact on the way many things, including religions, have been commodified, consumer society will perhaps realise what and when enough is enough. If we focus on consumerism's impact then Christian doctrine, Christian symbols and concepts will not be replaced with economic and market idolatries.

Ultimately Conradie is convinced that wealth and possessions represent no lasting form of happiness. According to the Christian faith, the highest form of happiness is represented by and in the gospel (Conradie, 2009:135). God provides our daily bread and we may approach God in prayer with all our material and spiritual needs. We need to talk theologically about money, buying, about consuming. However, this needs to be done within the context of the whole of God's dream for and work in creation. The Christian gospel speaks of the redemption of humanity and creation from sin and evil so that its inherent goodness and integrity can be appreciated anew.

As a community the Christian church should speak out prophetically against environmental destruction (2005a:184). He also calls for a "recycling" of Christianity that will

constitute a move from a hierarchical to an ecological model, from anthropocentrism to biocentrism, from a passive spirituality to a passionate spirituality and from ecclesial solidarity to ecological solidarity. For Conradie, ecotheology is not only concerned with the question of how Christianity can respond to environmental concerns, in fact, at a much deeper level it offers Christianity an opportunity for renewal and reformation. James Nash (referred to in Conradie 2005a:1) suggests that an ecological reformation of Christianity implies that there are significant flaws in the Christian tradition, else a reformation would not be necessary. We need to be honest about this fact. However, it also implies that flaws can be corrected and Nash adds that reformation is not something alien to the Christian faith. For this reason Conradie (2011a:282) suggests that the entire life and praxis of the church should include an ecological dimension and vision.

Finally, Conradie acknowledges that almost every aspect of Christian theology has come under the spotlight in ecotheological reflection – from biblical studies and hermeneutics, the history of Christianity in its many traditions and expressions, Christian doctrine, Christian virtues and values, Christian preaching, pastoral care, Christian education, and Christian mission. Conradie (2005a) also acknowledges that the many significant contributions to a Christian ecotheology discourse that emerged from impoverished local communities in Africa, India, Latin America, the Pacific and South-East Asia and should not be ignored. This constitutes contributions from a rich mosaic of cultures, languages, local contexts, bioregions, gender perspectives and theological traditions. Such ecological wisdom may be tools for CCAP Nkhoma Synod for its own ecotheological reflections and it may in its way also contribute to the ecotheological discourse from the unique cultural context of its members. Exactly *why and how* this specific culture may be taken into account and may inform the CCAP Nkhoma Synod's ecotheological perspective will be the subject of the chapters that follow.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### (ECO-)THEOLOGY AND (CHEWA) CULTURE

#### 4.1 Introduction

In Chapter Three of this study the focus was on the ecotheological thought of Ernst M. Conradie. It was seen that for Conradie the ecological crisis concerns both, even primarily, issues of religion and of culture – in the case of the latter, especially in light of so-called consumer culture. In Chapter Six possible ways will be identified in which traditional Chewa culture – the culture of the majority of the members of the CCAP Nkhoma Synod (cf. Brown, 2004:78) – resonates with ecological and ecotheological sensitivity, such as those of Conradie and as such may strengthen the CCAP Nkhoma Synod's efforts to bring an ecotheological message across to its members. However, before this may be done, one first has to establish *whether* this may be done in a theologically-legitimate way. For that reason, what is at issue in this chapter is a) the question of exactly what culture is – in particular with reference to the concept of (religious) “worldview” – and b) what *Chewa* culture then is and c) finally, what the relationship between faith/religion and culture may be.

#### 4.2 Theology and Culture

African theologian R. Winston Kawale (1998:9) defines theology as descriptive and critically-reflective, as analytical and interpretive in character. In its descriptive role, theology answers the question “*What* is the relationship between God and His world?” In answering this question, theology describes “text and historical context” to determine the relationship between God and the world. Kawale affirms that in its critical function theology also answers the question “*Why* is there this relationship between God and His world?” In answering this question theology evaluates and reflects on text and historical context to determine *why* there is this relationship. Kawale then sums up that the text and history are, therefore, the sources for doing theology.

In following Kawale's suggestion, theology must therefore include reflections on the Biblical text, but also on the context in which it is read, understood and proclaimed. The latter will also include reflections on culture. This is true for all contexts, but perhaps especially for the African context as, in the view of Ott (200:148), in Africa culture and religion cannot be separated. According to Ott, culture and religion in African societies “relate to each other like the

two foci of an ellipse, the contributions of both disciplines are indispensable.” But what exactly is meant by “culture”?

### 4.3 Definitions and Characteristics of “Culture”

#### 4.3.1 Definitions of “Culture”

One of the challenges facing scholars in any field when referring to the concept of culture is that there exists very many, sometimes contradicting, definitions of the phenomenon. More than a century ago, for Franz Boas (1911:149), culture was the totality of the mental and physical *reactions and activities* that characterise the behaviour of individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relation to their natural environment. Recently Ruth Benedict (2005) explained that what really binds people together is their culture, that is, their *ideas* and the *standards* they have in common. And, somewhere in the middle, Margaret Mead (1970:17), focusing on the ways in which culture is transmitted from one generation to the next, suggested that culture refers to the whole *complex of traditional behavior* that has been developed by the human race and is successively learned by each generation. According to Mead, one finds three kinds of culture: *post-figurative* culture, in which children learn primarily from their forebears; *cofigurative* culture, in which both children and adults learn from their peers; and *prefigurative* culture, in which adults learn also from their children – so-called primitive societies and small religious and ideological enclaves being primarily post-figurative, deriving authority from the past. August also refers to the way in which culture is transmitted (2010:60): “culture is how people structure their experience conceptually so that it can be transmitted as information from person to person and from generation to generation.” Furthermore,

... culture embraces all that contributes to the survival of man [sic], such as eating, economy, art, drama, dress, education, literature, music, politics, and religion. It is absorbed by living in it and changed by contact with outside cultures or inspiration from within.

American anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952 and 1949), seem to include all of the above elements in their understandings of culture as *the totality of learned and transmitted motor reactions, habits, techniques, ideas and values and the behavior they induce*. Kluckhohn (1949)

furthermore explains that culture is not only derived from “the way we are brought up”, but also by personal past experiences and the biological properties of the people concerned. As humans we have learned to adapt to our personal surroundings and have conditioned ourselves and our life styles to revolve around such surroundings by the most comfortable means possible. Cultural patterns, though clear and exact, are, according to Kluckhohn, indirectly communicated behavior transmitted by symbols to the extent that culture can also be seen as a system of symbols. One finds a similar view from David Schneider (1979), who views cultural concepts as denoting historical transmitted patterns of meanings *embodied in symbols*: a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their thoughts about and attitude towards life.

Another and very well-known American anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1972) refers to the many simplified meanings of culture as *the total way of life of a people*; the social legacy individuals acquire from their group; a way of thinking, feeling, and believing; as an abstraction from behavior; a theory on the part of the anthropologist about the way in which a group of people in fact behave; a storehouse of pooled learning; a set of standardised orientations to recurrent problems; learned behaviour; a mechanism for the normative regulation of behavior; a set of techniques for adjusting both to the external environment and to others; as a precipitate of history; and a behavioral map, sieve, or matrix.

Finally, from the perspective of the history of the understanding of the term culture, Spencer-Oatly (2012) concludes that overall, in the nineteenth century, the term culture was used in three ways: (1) culture referred to special intellectual or artistic endeavors or products, what today we might call “high culture” as opposed to “popular culture”. According to this understanding, only a portion – typically a small one – of any social group “has” culture. (2) It also referred to a quality possessed by all people in all social groups, who nevertheless could be arrayed on a continued development from “savagery” through “barbarism” to “civilization”. (3) An emphasis on the uniqueness of the many and varied cultures of different peoples or societies.

The above examples and differences in emphases give some indication why Kroeber and Kluckhohn could in a study conducted in 1952 already compile a list of 164 different definitions of the term culture (Helen Spencer-Oatly 2012) and why Apte (1994:2001), in the ten-volume *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics* summarises the problem as follows:

Despite a century of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s [still] no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature. Much of the difficulty in understanding the concept, characteristic and definition of culture stem from the different usages of the term as it was increasingly employed in the nineteenth century.

#### 4.3.2 *The Characteristics of Culture*

Despite the differences of opinion on what exactly culture refers to, Spencer-Oatly (2012) identifies twelve characteristic of culture worth mentioning in the current endeavor to understand the interaction between culture and theology.

##### *a) Culture is manifested at different layers of depth*

What Spencer means by this is that culture manifests itself at different levels, namely (a) observable artifacts, (b) values, and (c) basic assumptions.

##### *b) Culture affects behaviour and interpretations of behaviour*

Although certain aspects of culture are physically visible, their meaning is not: “their cultural meaning lies precisely and only in the way these practices are interpreted by the insiders.” A gesture may, for example, reflect positive behaviour somewhere and negative behaviour in other parts of the world.

##### *c) Culture can be differentiated from both universal human nature and unique individual personality*

Culture is learned, not inherited (cf. point ‘j’ below) and as such it derives from one’s social environment, not from one’s genes. In this sense culture should be distinguished from human nature<sup>33</sup> on one side, and from an individual’s personality<sup>34</sup> on the other.

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<sup>33</sup> According to Spencer-Oatly, *human nature* is what all human beings have in common: it represents the universal level in one’s “mental software”. It is inherited with one’s genes; within the computer analogy it is the “operating system” which determines one’s physical and basic psychological functioning. The human ability to feel fear, anger, love, joy, sadness, the need to associate with others, to play and exercise, the facility to observe the environment and talk about it with other humans all belong to this level of mental programming.

*d) Culture influences biological processes*

The majority of our conscious behaviour is acquired through learning and interacting with other members of our culture. Even responses to our purely biological needs (e.g., eating, coughing, defecating, etc.) are frequently influenced by our cultures. All people eat, but what, how often, how much, with whom, and according to what set of rules they eat are regulated, at least in part, by their culture.

*e) Culture is associated with social groups*

Culture is shared by at least two or more people. As almost everyone belongs to a number of different groups and categories of people at the same time, people unavoidably carry several layers of mental programming within themselves, corresponding to different levels of culture like national level, regional level, gender level, generational level, role of category, social class level (personal education and occupational ), and organisational level.

*f) Culture is both an individual construct and a social construct*

As an individual construct culture is as much an individual, psychological construct as it is a social construct. To some extent, culture exists in each and every one of us individually as much as it exists as a global, social construct. As social construct culture is a derivative of individual experience, something learned or created by individuals themselves or passed on to them socially by contemporaries or ancestors.

*g) Culture is always both socially and psychologically distributed in a group*

“Delineation of a culture’s feature will always be fuzzy”, according to Spencer-Oatly. Culture is a “fuzzy” concept, in that group members are unlikely to share identical sets of attitudes, beliefs, et cetera, but will rather show “family resemblances” in that similar cultural representations are held by a significant proportion of the group’s members.

*h) Culture has both universal (“etic”) and distinctive (“emic”) elements*

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<sup>34</sup> The *personality* of an individual, on the other hand, is the unique personal set of mental programs of a person, which that person does not share with any other human being. It is based upon traits that are partly genetically inherited and partly learned.

Humans have largely overlapping biologies and live in fairly similar social structures and physical environments that create major similarities in the way they form cultures. But within the framework of similarities there are differences. The same happens with language.<sup>35</sup>

*i) Culture is learned*

Culture is learned from the people you interact with as you are socialised. Spencer-Oatly explains this by referring to how adults react and talk to babies as a way to see the actual symbolic transmission of culture among people. Two babies born at exactly the same time in two parts of the globe may be taught to respond to physical and social stimuli in very different ways – some babies are, for example, taught to smile at strangers, whereas others are taught to smile only in very specific circumstances.

*j) Culture is subject to gradual change*

Any anthropological account of the culture of any society is a type of snapshot view of one particular time, for there are no cultures that remain completely static year after year.

*k) The various parts of a culture are all, to some degree, interrelated*

Cultures should be thought of as integrated wholes, as coherent and logical systems, the parts of which to a degree are interrelated. The components of culture are more than a random assortment of customs. If one views cultures as integrated systems, one may begin to see how particular culture traits fit into the integrated whole and consequently how they tend to make sense within that context.

*l) Culture is a descriptive not an evaluative concept*

Finally, people sometimes speak of “high” and “low” culture (cf. Spencer-Oatly above). This interpretation of culture is often linked to terms and concepts such as “civilized”, “well educated”, “refined”, “cultured”, and is associated with the results of such refinement. However, one should be careful for such distinctions as culture, in Spencer-Oatly’s understanding, does not refer to traits of specific groups within a society, but rather to the culture as a comprehensive

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<sup>35</sup> In language, Spencer-Oatly (2012) explains, *phonetics* deal with sounds that occur in all languages. *Phonemics* are sounds that occur in only one language.



system within societies as a whole. With all of the above in mind, the following section will look at specific elements of Chewa culture

#### 4.4 Chewa culture<sup>36</sup>

It will be impossible to discuss all aspects of Chewa culture within the scope of this study. Therefore some elements of Chewa have been selected, specifically with a view to Chapter Five where these will be brought into conversation with the ecotheological principles found in the thought of Ernst Conradie.

Before proceeding, one caveat has to be taken into account: Mante (2004:24) explains that “African culture” does not just refer pre-colonial cultures, but also post-colonial African cultures and besides the danger of essentialism (can one really speak of “African culture”?), one also has to remember that cultures do not remain static, as we have noted already with reference to the analysis by Spencer-Oatly above. In light of this, it should be remembered that some of the elements of Chewa culture have also undergone significant change over time; some may thus no longer exist in their original or any form anymore. However, the values or views they represent may linger on in other still-existing cultural practices or even simply in the cultural memory of (some) Chewa people. The fact that some of these cultural practices have changed are, however, not reason enough to disregard them completely. It may, in fact, be needed to remember or even retrieve them, especially with regard to their possible ecological significance. A good place to start when speaking of a culture and of the Chewa culture in particular is to look at the traditional Chewa worldview, which as will be seen, will also reveal much of traditional Chewa religion.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Amy Gough (2004) tells that the history of the Chewa people includes a number of stories encompassing facts, myths, traditions and ancestral beliefs that created contemporary Chewa culture. Legend holds that over one thousand years ago, some Nyanja Bantu-speaking peoples of Nigeria and Cameroon migrated to among others, the Congo-Luba area at Malambo in contemporary Democratic Republic of Congo. These Nyanja groups conquered more and more land and eventually their central location shifted from Malambo to the region of Choma within Congo. The *Kalonga* (leader), Chidzosi, who replaced the first *Kalonga*, Chinkhole (the *Kalonga* who led the group from Nigeria and Cameroon), travelled with some of his people from Choma and settled at Chewa Mountain, where the name of this tribe comes from (Nthara, 2009:9 and Longwe, 2006:17). The group did not stay here long due to bad agricultural conditions and proceeded to the Dzalanyama Hills, finally reaching Kaphirintiwa (meaning “the mill which was wet, soft and easy to press”). As they found many footprints for different animals and humans here, they concluded that it was here that God stood when creating the world.

<sup>37</sup> According to Gehman (1989), religion “...is the total traditional worldview with all values and beliefs.”

#### **4.4.1. *The Meaning of “Worldview”***

Referring to Clifford Geertz’s influential “The Interpretation of Cultures”, Kevin Schilbrack (2005), scholar of philosophy and religious studies, acknowledges that despite the fact that it and Geertz’s other famous essay, “Religion as a Cultural System”, is now more than thirty years old, his central thesis – that religions provide their practitioners with “models of reality”, that is, symbolic conceptions of the general order of existence – continues to be a fruitful way to understand important aspects of religious beliefs, practices and culture.

Geertz (1973:128) holds that religion connects proper conduct not just to reality in the sense of “real things”, but also to the general order of the nature of reality. For Geertz (1973:127-128), metaphysics is a defining feature of religion, what distinguishes this cultural model from others. By including metaphysics, Geertz claims that religion involves a theoretical or descriptive dimension by teaching some understanding of the most general context of human existence. In his definition of religion, Geertz (1973:127) (referring also Malinowski’s concept of a “charter”, Mircea Eliade’s concept of a paradigm and Bruce Lincoln’s concept of authoritativeness) also holds that religions encourage certain feelings, attitudes, and experiences and seek to inculcate certain ritual, aesthetic and ethical behavior.

Geertz (1973: 127-8) is of the view that religions in part consist of an ethos which means that religions intend to mobilize people and to orient their lives in this way, to provide “models” of the world. It follows from this definition that, like science, religions seek to describe aspects of the world. However, unlike science, religions describe not only contingent, empirical facts, but also “the very nature of reality” or “the way things” are “in their sheer actuality” (Geertz 1973:128).

In short, the notion of a religious metaphysics or a religious model of the world emphasises that those who practice religion typically consider them (religions) true, whereas the notion of a religious ethos or model for the world emphasises that religions are considered not merely true, but also authoritative (Geertz 1973: 90, 109-10, 118, 129).

What is also presupposed here, then, is a certain philosophical anthropology, namely that human beings seek not only to live, but to live in accordance with the way the world actually is or, as Geertz often says, to live “realistically” (Geertz 1973:130). According to Geertz (1973:131), people typically desire to ground their social practices, in some way or another, in

reality. In fact, the tendency to desire some sort of factual basis for one's commitments seems practically universal and "mere conventionalism" satisfies few people in any culture.

According to Schilbrack (2005), Geertz's view remains important because without a theory like it, scholars tend to approach religion as an aspect of culture unconnected to reality. He (Schilbrack) acknowledges that religious people may be liable to confusion, self-deception, and error, but notes that it is not clear that a disconnection from reality should be built into the very definition of religion. For Schilbrack (2005), in Geertz's understanding of religion the latter is treated as a culture's attempt to articulate its most comprehensive view of reality.

According to Rusbult (1999), a worldview is a theory of the world, used for living in the world. It is a "mental model of reality – framework of ideas and attitudes about the world, ourselves, and life, a comprehensive system of beliefs." It offers answers to a wide range of questions such as: What are humans, why we are here, and what is our purpose in life? What are our goals in life? When one makes decisions, what are one's values and priorities? What can we know, how, and with how much certainty?

Rusbult (1999) also explains that some worldview questions concern God: Does and can we know whether God exists? If so, what characteristics does God have and what is the relationship between God and the universe? Are natural events produced and guided by God and was the universe self-creating, or did God create it? Does God communicate with us (mentally and spiritually) and how? What is God's role in history and is there a purpose and meaning in history, for the individual and society as a whole or is life just a long string of things that happen? And finally, what happens after death?

Worldviews also affect decisions and actions in everyday life, for individuals and societies. Worldviews are also affected by factors, such as inherited characteristics, background experiences and life situations, values, attitudes, habits, and more. These factors vary from one person to another and, therefore, even though some parts of a worldview are shared by many in a community, other parts differ between individuals.

In the final instance, though, the beliefs, values, and behaviour in a culture stem directly from its worldview. If this is so, what can be understood to be the traditional Chewa worldview?

#### 4.4.2. *The Traditional Chewa Worldview*

##### 4.4.2.1. *Kaphirintiwa as the Centre and Origin of Chewa Worldview*

According to Chewa legend, when the Chewa people were still living at Uluba, in what is today the DRC, they partook in a special dance called *mbuli* (Sylvester and Amos, 2010:47). However, once they reached Malawi, they started the *Nyau* dance, which was directly connected to their traditional religion symbols of invisible ancestral spirits. At Kaphirimtiwa in Malawi, the Chewa was said to find mysterious markings, resembling the footprints of people, animals and writings on rocks (Nthara, 2009:9, see also Ott, 2000:159). As a result, the legend holds, a creation and fall myth developed among the Chewa as Kaphirimtiwa was seen as the place where creation took place. Breughel (2001:25) explains that, according to Chewa legend, with the first man and woman appeared pairs of all animals as well as god, *Chiuta Mulungu*.<sup>38</sup> The latter was accompanied by the first rains. During this first period, *Chiuta Mulungu*, people and animals, lived together in peace.

However, peace ended when humans invented fire, which set the grass ablaze and caused animals to flee, filled with rage against humankind. *Chiuta Mulungu* himself was rescued by a spider that spun a thread along which he [god] climbed to the sky. Thus, driven away by the wickedness of humankind, god proclaimed that people would die and join him in the sky where they would be making clouds of rain in order to quench the fires they had invented. These creation stories in Chewa cosmogonic narratives have been recorded in different works of different scholars, among them Chimombo (1994:12, 49, 173; 1974:12, 13,), Mapanje (1981:7, 9, 45) and Munthali (1980:28-29). Historical works on the Chewa by Kings Phiri (1975:41) Linden (1979:199, 202,206) and Ntara (1973:8-9), Chewa anthropological studies by Schoffeleers (1992:54; 1972:13, 1971:271-2810), and studies on Chewa oral literature from Malawi collected by Schoffeleers and Roscoe (1985:19-20, 47-49, also Breugel 1976:39-46 and Chisale 1996a and 1996b) also record descriptions of Chewa accounts of the creation of human beings, plants, animals, the sun, the moon, the stars and water at all Kaphirintiwa. According to

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<sup>38</sup> *Chiuta Mulungu* means “big bow”, as it refers to a god who stretches the rainbow across the sky, presiding over the fecundity which the rains bring. As such the rainbow and the name of *Chiuta Mulungu* is symbolic of how he [according to legend *Chiuta Mulungu* was male] shows his concern for humanity by them giving rain.

Kawale (1998:20), the Kaphirimtiwa narrative has for long played an important role in Chewa society.

#### 4.4.2.2 *The Chewa Tripartite Worldview*

The Chewa tripartite worldview represents three aspects of the material world: heaven or sky (*thambo*), the earth (*dziko*), and water (*madzi*) (Chimombo 1994:11, 49, 173; cf. Munthali, 1980:28-29; Schoffeleers and Roscoe, 1985:19-20).

*With regard to the Chewa view of the heavens*, Kawale (1998:26; also Scott, 1929:253; Gwengwe, 1965:19-31) refers to three Chichewa terms associated with heaven and the sky: *kumwamba*, the dwelling place of *Chiuta Mulungu* above the sky and where the ancestors go to when they die; *mlengalenga*, the empty space or the expanse between the sky and the earth; and *nthambo*, the material world where the sun, moon and stars are attached and supported by the wooden pestles that stand at the ends of the earth. According to Kawale (1998:26, see also Steyler, 1939:186; Scott, 1932:522), this implies that the Chewa regard *kumwamba* and *mlengalenga* as non-material. In contrast, the Kaphirimtiwa narrative depicts *thambo* as the concrete material space which opened up and let *Chiuta Mulungu*, human beings, animals and the rains descend the earth. Humans as well as animals were therefore in this sense divine as they all came from heaven with *Chiuta Mulungu* (Schoffeleers and Roscoe 1985: 81-82, 94-95).

*With regard to heavenly bodies*, according to Schoffeleers and Roscoe (1985:81-82, 94-95), in the Chewa traditional worldview *dzuwa* (sun), *mwezi* (moon) and *nyenyezi* (stars) are described in a narrative called “Why the moon has mud on its face”. The sun and moon were said to have been chiefs on earth, first humans, but after quarrelling, the weaker of the two escaped and was transformed into the moon (*mwezi*). The other followed and was transformed into the sun (*dzuwa*). The morning and evening stars are the wives of the moon and the rest of the stars, their children. Though the Chewa never worshipped the sun and moon as gods, in traditional lore they are animate things, the sun travelling from east to west, sleeping in the east. The moon dies and resurrects as a human being dies and continue to live in the form of ancestors.

*The earth*, according to Kawale (1998:31), is depicted as pre-existent with *Chiuta Mulungu*. The Kaphirimtiwa narratives tell that in the beginning there was *Chiuta Mulungu* and earth, which means that the earth shares the divine nature of *Chiuta* because, for the Chewa, the earth, too, is a living being. According to Kalilombe (1980:40), traditionally the Chewa regard

the earth also as a living being, as “mother earth”. Makombe (1982:3, 8; see also Amanze, 1979/80:19, and Chisale, 1996b:23) comments that apparently at first the dead among the Chewa were not buried in the ground, but were put in the trees and pools because they took the earth as divine and could, therefore, not put a dead body in it. Furthermore, before the Chewa would begin cultivating the land, they were to offer it sacrifice, begging permission to do so from it as a living thing. Similarly, hills like Bunda, Kaphirintiwa, Nkhoma, Chilenje, Thyolo and Chididi were understood as being sacred also.

#### 4.4.2.3 *The Three Chewa Deities and Their Relationship to Nature*

Most Chewa religious traditions show that the Chewa believed in the existence of a high god, *Mulungu* or *Chiuta Mulungu*, a rain god, *Chisumphu* and his consort, the goddess *Chauta* (Chimombo, 1994:62; 1974:13, 49; Musopole, 1983:5, 7, 28, 50). In rain-calling rituals *Chisumphu* is represented by a male human being/s (*Kamundi*) (cf. Chisale, 1996a:78; 1996b:41; Kwapulani, 1981/82:150; Linden, 1979:198) and *Chauta* by a female human being/s (*Makewana*) (cf. Chisale, 1996b:24; Phiri, 1996:60; Schoffeleers and Roscoe, 1985:48-49; Metcalfe 1954:49). Furthermore, the Chewa always offered sacrifices to *Chisumphu*, *Chauta* and to their ancestral spirits (Chisale 1996b:41; Makombe 1982:2,8; Chimombo 1974:20).

Musopole (1983:161) asserts that *Chiuta Mulungu* was approached “only secondarily”, i.e. only after it became evident that *Chisumphu*, *Chauta* and ancestors have failed to provide rain. *Chiuta Mulungu* is perceived as a transcendent god in the sense that he withdrew when human beings invented fire. He then gave all the responsibility for caring for humanity and all living and non-living things to *Chisumphu*, *Chauta* and the ancestral spirits so that the human beings offered all the sacrifices to them first and only to *Chiuta Mulungu* when *Chisumphu* and *Chauta* failed to provide in their needs (Chisale, 1996a:11-12; 1996b:41; Schoffeleers and Roscoe, 1985:19-20).

Kawale (1998:24) asserts that only *Chiuta Mulungu* is seen as and also called *Mlengi* (creator) (or female, *Namalenga*) (“one who molds or creates” – Longwe, 2007:20). This means that he is the one who created both male and female, and is also the one who gave birth to creation like a mother. However, *Chiuta Mulungu* did not necessarily create all there is in a direct sense as some of his original creations were later transformed into different things.

Traditionally, the Chewa approached their gods through a hierarchy of ancestral spirits, the living king and prophets (Phiri 2004:97). According to Amanze (2002:62), there were two kinds of Chewa shrines, namely *Kachisi wa Mvula* (the shrine of the rainmaker) and *Kachisi wa mwini Mudzi* or *kachisi wa mfumu* (the shrine of the village headmen). Office bearers of both shrines comprised a hierarchy of a king, heads of families, prophetesses and shrine attendants. Very often the *kachisi wa mfumu* shrine was owned by a chief or a village headman while *kachisi wa mvula* was owned by a headman only by virtue of him being a descendant of the Chewa ancestral spirits or any person who had close relationship with the cult leader (Amanze, 2002:63). Furthermore, according to Van Breughel (2001:50):

For the Chewa to call for rains from *Chiuta Mulungu* they had to conduct rain rituals by systematic mountain burning at Bunda. A special mother of the whole Chewa tribe, called *Makewana* (mother of children), was always the spiritual leader and the mediator between God and the people.

Trees and land, which symbolised the unity between the earth and the sky, were always respected. The mistreating of the trees, mountains and shrines (*kachisi*) were understood to bring misfortune to the entire community because all these were very important for *Chiuta Mulungu*. The many names of the Chewa god or Chewa deities, including *Chiuta Mulungu*, *Chauta*, *Chisumphu*, *Mphambe*, *Leza/Mlezi/Lezi*, *Chanjiri/Nanjiri*, *N'theradi*, *Matsakamula*, and *Mulungu* are all related directly to natural phenomena such as the rain, creation, or to god's sustaining power (Longwe, 2007:21). They also relate to the economic activities of agriculture of the Chewa people. According to Longwe (2007), the interaction with the spirits, who spoke to the supreme spirit on behalf of the people at *kachisi* (shrines), the Bunda and Kaphirimtiwa mountains or under ancestral trees, were all signs of the unity between heaven and earth, supreme spirit, human beings and nature. For Longwe, Chewa traditional religion thus offers a full picture of the interconnectedness between god, humanity, nature and land.

Thus far the focus was on the traditional Chewa religious worldview and cosmology, however, equally important to this study are other elements of Chewa culture.



### 4.4.3 Ownership in Chewa Culture

#### 4.4.3.1 Land Ownership

In traditional Chewa society the most important kind of ownership of a community is that of land. Land first belongs to *Chiuta Mulungu* as the creator of everything. Secondly, it belongs to the ancestors, who received it from *Chiuta Mulungu* at Kaphirintiwa where each present and future member of the family inherited a portion of the land given to that specific family line. As a result, the Chewa like calling themselves “children of the soil” or “of the land”, indicating their legitimate ownership of the land. Land serves as a means toward unity, identity, life and healing. Chewa chiefs are called by the name soil/land, *Chalo*, and the land is owned by the *Chalos-eni nthakawo* (traditional chiefs, owners of that specific land through ancestral heritage). Therefore, the sense of belonging to a village only really becomes permanent when one or a family has been given a permanent tract of land by the chief for themselves to clear. According to Kawale (1998:47):

The Chewa chiefs have also used the human footprints at the Kaphirimtiwa creation rock as the charter, or trademark, for the Chewa ideology that they are the rightful owners of the land and the rightful rulers of Malawi. The footprints of Kaphirintiwa are interpreted as being the footprints of the Chewa ancestors. As the owners of the land, the chiefs believe that they are “diviners” (*gawa*) of the land to the subordinate chiefs and all the foreigners.

The *Chalos* share parts of the land with groups of village headmen, who also divide that land for cultivation. Chewa society is traditionally an agricultural society and even today agriculture remains the main economic source of income for many Malawians (Longwe 2007:21).

The village headman or a chief determines how much land should be given the people of the village. Any land given to a family is received as if it is the gift from a mother who cares for that family (see 4.4.3.1 above). According to Ott and Moyo (2002:49): “From our cultural perspective, the land is like a mother who takes care of her children by providing them with the necessary provisions for their sustenance from her own resources.” It is expected that everyone



in the house should show special love to this mother, as one would a natural mother, through the take care they take of their mother.

To show that land also unites the community, a village has a graveyard (or two villages may share one) and according to Chimhanda (2014), territorial integrity is maintained, amongst others, in that one is buried in ancestral soil.

#### 4.4.3.2 Ownership of Trees

Among the Chewa, trees have traditionally played a very important role for many reasons. Some trees are sources of traditional medicine – different parts of different trees may also be mixed by professional medicine men (or women) to prepare *kukwima* for protection. Some trees are used for gatherings – sometimes the whole village may gather under a big tree for food fellowship. The same tree could be used by a chief with his village elders under which they will meet for deliberation or for judging disputes. Other trees in the middle of the village may be reserved for different levels of chiefs', and girls' and boys' meetings (Longwe, 2007:43).

*Mkangali* is an example of a ceremony among the Chewa for which a *bwalo lalikulu* (a highly-respected large piece of ground) is needed for the community gathering. A *bwalo* is a place under a big tree in the middle of the village. One *bwalo* may be a place under a tree where elders of the village gather, another *bwalo* may be for funeral ceremonies and yet another *bwalo* for wedding ceremonies, for a playground, or for resting after days' work et cetera.

According to Longwe (2007:43), there are also normally deterrents planted about six metres away to the east of the tree. Close to the *bwalo*, there may be a temporary grass structure called a *liunde*, for dressing for *nyau* dancing. Near the *bwalo* is also a house that serves as a seclusion house for initiates. A short distance outside the village one finds yet another big tree, a *mtengo wa anamwali* (the initiate tree).

The trees in a village graveyard are owned by the whole village with the chief as the highest authority over these trees. This means that no one, not even the chief, is allowed to cut or use graveyard trees and grass for any purpose. These trees and the grass in the graveyard are the dwelling places for the spirits of the people who were buried there. Anyone found in the graveyard is automatically seen as a *mfiti* (a witch) because he/she is suspected of collecting material for the purpose of doing magic.

#### 4.4.4. Traditional Chewa Organisational Structures and Decision-Making

Traditional Chewa organisational structures are based on their worldview of the existence of a visible hierarchy of human beings as well as the invisible hierarchy of divinities. The visible hierarchy comprises a king, chiefs, rainmakers, diviners and shrine prophetesses. According to Mwakanandi (1990:54), religious leaders are regarded as the ones who possess particular power and knowledge.

For the election of office bearers, candidates had to meet certain social and moral standards in terms of age, faith, obedience to traditions and ancestral matrimonial blood lines (Phiri, 1972:16). It is believed that the supreme god rules the people through a pyramidal order of ancestral spirits and the prophetesses serving at a shrine. Among the living, the king enjoys the highest position of authority and power (Van Breughel, 2001:247, 269). Even today these traditional ruling structures influence decision making.<sup>39</sup>

In order to understand contemporary ways of decision-making in the Chewa community, one should also understand the Chewa traditional ruling system. In her work *Women, Presbyterianism and Patriarchy: Religious experience of the Chewa Women in Central Malawi*, Phiri (1997:12) affirms that the Chewa have a ruling system with a structure based on patriarchal and pyramidal patterns. In this sense it is similar to the dominant system of rule in most African societies. This then means that among the Chewa, men and elders (with a chief at the top) are the main decision makers and rulers. Zeze (2012:42) confirms that among the Chewa all the final ruling power and authority rest in the hands of a single person, often bearing the title of father or uncle at family, village or tribal level.

An interesting characteristic of Chewa culture is its traditional matrilineal system. However, at *family level* this does not mean that women are the leaders or hold authority in Chewa culture, but rather that *atsibweni* (the uncle, a brother to the *mother*, who is the wife a husband in the specific family) is considered the *mwini mbumba* (the “owner” of the mother and children of the family). It means that the ruling authority and power rests in *his* hands. In others

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<sup>39</sup> It is important to note and it will be referred to again later that, according to Brown (2004:78), the traditional Chewa system of rule influenced the Nkhoma Synod leadership style as the *abusa* (ministers) at a congregational level and the General Secretary at the secretariat level are similar to the ruling system of the village headmen and chiefs in the Chewa tribe. This agrees with Paas (2007:8)’s claim that the organisational structure of the C.C.A.P, which include the Nkhoma Synod, is an imitation of the ruling system of the society.

words, the Chewa has an *uncle-ruled* social structure where all governing powers and authority rests in his hands. Here it means that all decisions of a family concerning happiness or grief of children and a mother in the house are made by an uncle. His decisions are always final.

At *village level*, the rule is in the hands of a village headman. All the governing decisions rest in his hands and he is assisted by his ministers or councillors. The village headman's decision is final and he is able to influence village solidarity in all activities of the village. Several villages (from six upwards) have a group village headman. If a situation in a village reaches the stage where it cannot be handled by the village chief alone, it is referred to the group village headman. His main responsibilities are to represent the *Chalo* in the area. He has also final authority in his area. The whole area of several group village headmen constitutes a Traditional Authority (TA) are under a leadership of a *gogo Chalo*, *Mwini dziko*, or *Mwini nthaka* (meaning "the owner of the land" or "king").

The *gogo Chalo* is thus a decision maker above his group village headmen. He is responsible for installation of a new village and group village headman and above all *chalos* there is the *kalonga*, the paramount chief of all the Chewa in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Mozambique and Malawi. According to tradition, the *kalonga* was the first to share and divide the land among others long ago. This is why he is also called *Kalonga Gawa Undi* ("the Kalonga who shares land with people"). Every year, all the Chewa *chalos* pay homage to the *Kalonga Gawa Undi* in Zambia.

This traditional hierarchy is also connected to nature in that it originally developed when people began to believe that the royal family of the *kalonga* clan (the Phiri) possessed rain-making powers.

#### **4.4.5. Communality and Solidarity in Traditional Chewa Culture: *Moyo* as the Basis of *moyo***

*Divine Moyo* (with a capital M – Life) is what provides in the basic needs for a Malawian, for example, the forest provides food, materials for building a home, medicine, sanctuary for religious practices, a cemetery and dwelling place for ancestral spirits. As such nature also plays an important role in human life and in the process of human growth, life and development and as such nature and persons are also one, woven by creation into one texture or fabric of life. This

living fabric of nature is sacred; it does not mean that nature should be worshipped, but rather that it ought to be treated with respect (Sindima, 1991:137ff.).

For the Chewa, the universe is full of sacred life, full of life that transcends itself through fecundity. This is why Harvey Sindima, Malawi-born Presbyterian, says that *moyo* for Malawians, is both physical and spiritual. He notes that in part, *moyo* is life as manifested in biological existence. As such it is shared by, and binds together, all living things. Sindima also explains that *moyo* is spiritual and sacred because it is rooted in divine mystery. Divine Life, signified by the capitalized *Moyo*, is the source and foundation of all *moyo*. All life – people, animals, and the earth – originate from and therefore shares in an intimate relationship of bondedness (to use Sindima’s terminology) with divine life (*Moyo*). This also bondedness entails a way of living guided and enriched by respect for fellow human beings and the rest of creation.

In African cultures and traditions, life and world are generally closely connected. Sindima (1990:138) comments that the African understanding of the world is life-centered. For Malawians, Sindima continues, in the human sphere the process of life achieves fullness when humans are richly connected to other people, to other creatures, and to the earth itself. Among the Chewa, humans realize their own fullness only by realizing the bonds and bondedness of life. In connection with this, Sindima also mentions the concept of *umunthu*<sup>40</sup> or fullness of life.

#### 4.4.5.1 *Umunthu as the Aim of Chewa Life*

Chewa culture, like many African cultures, is a communal, rather than an individualistic culture. Communal activities and marital and familial ties are also the main ways in which solidarity and unity is created, maintained and nurtured in traditional Chewa culture. This all has to do with *umunthu*. According to Kwiyani (2012):

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40 In explaining the meaning of the term “*umunthu/ubuntu/buthu*” Mluleki Mnyaka and Mokgethi Motlhabi (2005) describe it as a term which derives from “*munthu*” meaning a person, a human being. They say that it defines a positive quality supposedly possessed by a person. It is an internal state of being or the very essence of being human. Mnyaka and Motlhabi assert that *ubuntu* is not only about human acts, it is about being, it is a disposition, and it concerns values that contribute to the well-being of others and of community. Not merely positive human qualities, but the very human essence itself, which “lures” and enables human beings to become *abantu* or humanised beings, living in daily self-expressive works of love and efforts to create harmonious relationships in the community and the world beyond. Ubuntu is called by different names according to the language of a particular society, and among these is *umunthu*, in Chichewa.

*Umunthu*, which means ‘personhood’, is an expansive philosophical, theological, and spiritual concept that actually puts human beings in a bonded community of life that includes God, spirits, society, and nature. It describes a well-rounded philosophy of life in which to be a person – to have *umunthu* – is to be at peace with oneself, the community around, God, the spirits, and nature. For this reason, when Malawians say ‘*wakuti ali ndi umunthu/mzimvu*’ (someone has personhood/is a person/is a human being), they mean that the person is kind, sociable, caring, self-giving, generous, communal, and hospitable, spiritual, understanding, etc. To have *umunthu* is to be someone who humanizes others through the acts of hospitality, inclusivity, and generosity, listening, etc.

For Malawians, “human life is a fiber in the fabric of the totality of life” to again use Sindima’s turn of phrase. Sindima also writes that the phrase “being-in-plenitude” best describes the African notion of persons because it emphasises the unity or connectedness of persons to one another and to nature. In *umunthu* in Malawi, as commented by Sindima (1991), humanity cannot have identity without reference to other persons and nature. This is only possible in a total framework of life. In Africa, humanity is often defined as people engage in work, ritual practice and symbolic activities. People must also understand themselves as belonging to nature, as living the life of nature. Through Malawians’ relationships with nature they discover their identity and the possibility of living life in full. Sindima furthermore notes that as nature opens itself up to people, it presents possibilities for experiencing the fullness of life, possibilities for discovering how inseparably bonded people are to each other and to all of creation. For Malawians, through their relationships with life, nature and with one another, individuals give themselves new meaning and achieve *umunthu*. At the same time, creation achieves new meaning through these persons. In many ways, *moyo* transcends itself as the possibilities for the realisation of *umunthu* are created.

#### 4.4.5.2 The Extended Family in Chewa Culture

In Chewa culture, one of the strongest bonds that binds people together is the bond of the extended family. This is reflected in traditional phrases such as *chibale ndichipysera*, which means that family relationships are like scars that does not disappear from the body; *mlendo ndi*

*mnasi*, which means a visitor is also like family and should be treated the same way; and *mwana ndi mtima*, which means a child is like the heart of the parents even if the child grows old. The above sayings are often repeated by chiefs and other traditional rulers, councillors and judges. This shows that a sense of community and solidarity are very strong elements of Chewa society. This is also shown particularly with reference to other characteristics of Chewa culture and roles within it.

#### 4.4.5.3 Chewa Women and Customs

Among the Chewa, women are important custodians of customs and much of their cultural knowledge is transferred to girl children as the latter grow up. Customs and traditions are passed on orally to young ones, specifically when they reach puberty. Chewa cosmogonic narratives in particular are handed down from generation to generation. With social changes there is a real risk, however, of these narratives being lost. Fortunately, in recent years some of these traditional accounts have been collected and recorded by anthropologists and culture scholars, poets, historians, literary students and artists. These sources include creation narratives accounting for various elements of nature (Kawale, 1998:19).

Girl children in Chewa culture have always been seen as the future custodians of culture, tradition and customs. This is why their initiation ceremonies are frequent and long. The *anamkungwi* (women cultural instructors) play a very important role in these ceremonies and are the primary custodians of traditional customs (Longwe 2007:19).

*Chinamwali* (initiation) rituals are conducted at the *tsimba* (hiding place in the bush). So, the bush is also very important for transmission of customs to young girls. Even in the Nkhoma Synod, the Chewa initiations ceremonies of girls are paralleled by *chilangizo* (young boys' and girls' moral and spiritual instructions). Because of the amount of instruction involved, the length of initiations differs for girls and boys – one week for girls as opposed to two days for boys. A driving force behind all this is the Chewa belief in the *mizimu ya makolo* (ancestral spirits) as the guardians of ancestral customs, which must be passed on from generation to generation through initiation rites, thus conferring on the initiates their specific identity and also a sense of their history. The traditional religion among the Chewa, which is directly connected to ancestral spirits and the supreme spirit, has also helped them to preserve their customs and traditions. While initiation rites (for boys and girls) are the means by which one becomes an adult member

of Chewa society, girls are seen as “sacred vessels of life” responsible for the replenishing of the tribe. The presence of *Nyau-gule wamkulu* (the “big picture dance”) is not just to inculcate right behaviour, but also to intercede with *Chiuta* (god) for continued fertility in the village.

#### 4.4.5.4 Marriage in Chewa culture

Traditionally, the Chewa followed a matrilineal system of marriage. Just as the Bible in Genesis 2:24 that says that “a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife and they will become one flesh”, a husband is traditionally expected to leave his home and follow the wife. There he is called *nkamwini* meaning “he belongs to others not from us, hence to be treated with care” and all qualms against him when he misbehaves are directed to *his uncle* (his mother’s brother). All the children claim the home of their mother as their real home and their uncle (their mother’s brother) has full authority over the family of his sister.

When choosing a village headman, group village headman or a traditional authority (TA) chief, people choose a person born to a *sister* of the former leader. The choice of the chief is also traditionally left to elderly women in a society. Longwe (2007) tells that women in Chewa culture have always been significant within the familial system as they are always regarded as the *matsinde a mtundu* (the root of the lineage). As was seen above, religiously women in Chewa culture are also very important participants in different rituals, for example, in rites of passage in the society (Longwe 2007:18; see also Ott 2000:183).

#### 4.4.5.5 Dima or Chiwira

*Dima* or *chiwira* refer to the communal cultivation of each other’s gardens. According to this custom, a number of families draw up a time table for working in members’ gardens. Ngoma and Chauma (2010:84) tells that the owner of the garden to be worked on a specific day was supposed to prepare either beer, sweet beer, *msima* (food cooked by use of maize flour), *chingowe* (dry cooked maize) or *mitama* (pounded dry cooked maize) so that inbetween the work all the families working together may eat together. Even people outside the circle, from the same village or from another village, may come and help with the work and share in the meal. Drinking of beer occurs at the end of the day and is referred to in a tongue in cheek manner as *chikodzera m’njira* (urinating alongside the road) because all those present would be doing this all the way home.



#### 4.4.5.6. *Chidyerano*

To express unity and solidarity, a number of families in a village may eat lunch or dinner together, called *chidyerano*. Families living close to one another or around a *bwalo* (see above) often do so. At these occasions, according to Ngoma and Chauma (2010:85), women from related families will bring *msima* to one place where their husbands and sons could eat together. Anyone who refused to partake in the *chidyerano* would be called *kanga ndiwamba* or *mbombo* (a glutton eating all by himself).

#### 4.4.5.7 *Dancing and playing together*

Dancing and playing together are also bonds of unity and solidarity in Chewa communities. The dances of the Chewa include the *chiterera* (this dance does not need drums, but women or girls dance in the circle while clapping hands) and *chintali* (a dance by the women and girls, always accompanied by two drums and in a single circle). Men and boys dance the *mganda* (dancers line up in four or five straight lines according to the type of voice of the individual). The songs sang during all these dances are always educational and concern different moral values such as unity, obedience, discipline, loyalty, love, interpersonal relationships, and many more (Katani 2008:119; Breughel 2001:265; Ngoma and Chauma 2010:57).

#### 4.4.5.8 *Solidarity in times of happiness and grief*

There are two main periods in Chewa society when people join and express happiness together, namely at the birth of a child and at marriages. At marriages, for example, all the women in the village come together weeks before the marriage where they will begin the preparation of food by pounding maize for flour and soaking pounded maize in water. After a week they gather again and take *mphale* (the pounded maize) to the maize mill for the production of maize flour. Men and boys have to be bringing fire wood from the communal forest for the women to use for cooking. Three to five days before the date of the wedding, the women gather for the preparation of sweet beer and further cooking. All the women from the groom's side (the *akuchimuna*) come to the village of the bride five days before the date so that they join friends on the bride's side (the *akuchikazi*) for the celebration.



On the night before the wedding, women, girls, boys and some men dance and sing throughout the night to express happiness that the number of their community will increase. People from surrounding villages will join the wedding celebration on the actual day and everyone eats and drinks sweet beer. After the traditional or church ceremonies all the guests have to gather together and give the newly-weds gifts in the form of weaved containers of different sizes, money and different kitchen utensils.

Another occasion for celebration is the birth of a child. At the time of the “warming up of the child” (*kufundika mwana*) at three months, special rituals are followed for proper protection of the child. Up to that time there must be total sexual abstinence in the related families – *ngati kusamala mimba*. After warming the child, the sexual abstinence for both the parents of the child as well as for close relatives comes to an end.

Finally, a common cultural practice among the Chewa women called *chipongo*, is also an expression of joy and solidarity. *Chipongo* refers to the exchanges of visits between women where those visiting the other bring different gifts and the ones visited prepare food and all feast together with surrounding families. They all celebrate the coming of *apongo* (their neighbour). In time the visitors will in turn be paid a visit. This sharing of goods confirms what is called *chipande chatherere chimakoma mkuyenderana*, which means both parties in a community must benefit from each other. It is a sign of unity, love and equity.

The grief expression of unity is in particular seen at funerals. The whole area (at least two villages or wards) is affected. All personal activities are put on hold until the burial has been taken place. During this time there is a deep sense of communion and belonging to one another in the village. All women and men, girls and boys, are supposed to sleep at the *siwa* (a house where the body of the dead person is kept and where the mourning takes place). Women and girls sleep inside the *siwa* and males sleep outside it around a burning fire.

According to Van Breughel (2001:102), “[funerals ] is the major event in the life of the Chewa village communities. Everything else has to give way to it. Meetings may be planned, but if there is *maliro* [funeral] nobody will turn up to the meeting.”

Funerals are also the only time when trees in the graveyard may be cut for use during the funeral activities. Anyone found to have broken the funeral rules, be it a girl, boy, man, woman, chief’s minister or the chief him/herself, is punished on the spot before the end of the burial service. Funerals are indeed very social events for the entire community. Even today, regardless

of whether the deceased was Christian or not, funerals remain the occasion for a reunion for a long-separated relatives, believers and non-believers among the Chewa when they gather in large numbers to pay tribute to the deceased. For the Chewa this large gathering also portrays the concept that the deceased has not died but has left them only to join the spirit world. That is why, notices of the death of someone will often read that the person *watsiya osati kuti wafa* (has left us, not dead, but has just passed away to join the ancestral spirits).

During the funeral, close family members have to wear a piece of cloth around their heads to show that they belong to one family. Across the road on both sides of the village leaves are put as a sign to passers through. Anyone passing through has to visit the *siwa* to either give a few coins or to offer their condolences to show their solidarity with the family of the deceased. Everyone attending the funeral also have to bring chickens, maize flour or *sanda* (cloth to cover the dead body and heads of the mourners). All attendees are fed and six or more people may eat from one big plate and wash the latter in one pail. These acts show and instil love and oneness. Everything that is done at the funeral is linked to the showing of solidarity of the community.<sup>41</sup>

#### 4.4.5.8 Artistic Expressions of Chewa Culture

Finally, as in most cultures, in Chewa culture art is a way of communication. Martin Ott (2000:13) comments that as basic means of communication, Africans in general have always favored oral tradition and the use of images and symbols. Art and symbolism (sculpture, paintings/drawings and weaving) in Chewa culture are privileged vehicles of expression. According to Ott (2000:121), when human beings transform natural raw materials with their hands they form bonds that connect them with their relatives and together they transcend, by means of the transformed object, the threshold of the invisible. In line with this Breugel (2001:50-51) writes, for example, that the *kachisi* (shrine) at Tsang'oma was made in such a way that it had to contain four opened doors each facing a different direction to symbolise *Chiuta Mulungu* (God).

An example of the close link between art and the natural environment in Chewa culture can be found in the *nyau* ritual (see above), where different animal images are portrayed that represent the spirits of important chiefs. One image is that of elephants. Another structure called

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<sup>41</sup> According to Molly Longwe (2006:17) these customs already existed hundreds of years before missionaries appeared in Malawi/Nyasaland.

*Mdondo* (snake) is carried by 5 to 12 people representing powerful spirits; the *mkango* (lion) represents a fearful spirit; the *gwape* (antelope) represents a good spirit that can lead dead people's spirits to where the spirits live; the hyena represents a spirit of a dead chief, who was very greedy, et cetera (Breugel 2001:157).

According to Katani (2008:119), the Chewa are also born musicians: "They are born with music making, dancing techniques and the theory of music." Historically, music formed part of everyday activities among the Chewa in Malawi. It was incorporated in whatever activity they undertook. Even today music still plays a special role in Chewa society 1) as a reminders of the past, 2) as a ways of expressing feelings, 3) as a ways of expressing their way of life, and 4) as a ways of worshipping and communicating religious messages.

In light of the above reflections on what exactly culture may be, what the characteristics of culture are and an overview was given of some of the elements of Chewa culture, the following section will focus on the question of what the relationship between culture and theology/faith may be. If it is true that culture and religion/theology may legitimately influence one another, it will prepare the way for Chapter Five of this study where the ecotheological thought of Ernst M. Conradie will be brought into conversation with ecologically-relevant elements of traditional Chewa culture en route to informing a C.C.A.P Nkhoma Synod ecotheological position.

#### **4.5 The Relationship between Culture and Theology**

The question of exactly what the relationship between theology and culture or religion and culture may be, if at all, has for centuries been part of the Christian tradition. Ever since the spread of Christianity to the gentiles in New Testament times up to the present, theologians have grappled with this question. In this section the focus falls on one of the most influential and most well-known and relatively recent, perspectives on this issue, namely the five paradigms of "Christ and culture" as proposed by the twentieth-century American theologian Richard Niebuhr. Although more than half a century old and (as will be seen) not above critique, scholars still regard this as a seminal work on the topic. For example, scholars such as Allbee (2005), Carson and Stackhouse (2002) and Szterszky (2013) admit that they have found the ground from where to start from to offer updated and biblically-informed approaches for the contemporary Christian church regarding this issue in the work of Niebuhr.

In the Chewa language there is saying *akulu akale ndi m'dambo mozimila moto*, comparing the experience of old people with rivers that quench wild fires in the bush; perhaps the thought of Niebuhr may act in a similar way here.

#### 4.5.1. *Niebuhr's First Paradigm: Christ against Culture*

For Niebuhr (1951:54ff.), this is the most uncompromising view towards culture. It affirms the sole authority of Christ over culture and resolutely rejects culture's claims to loyalty. In this paradigm, Niebuhr has been influenced by the ideas of not partaking of the evils of this fallen world and that that Christians need not and should not become entangled in it. Here the emphasis is on opposition to culture even to the point of withdrawal from society. Christians using this model consider the world outside of the church to be hopelessly corrupted by sin. Carson and Stackhouse (2002) summarise this position as:

The kingdom of God comes to supersede it [the world and its culture] – currently in the purity of the church, and ultimately in the messianic kingdom. God calls Christians to “come out from among them and be ye separate”.

Niebuhr considers the impulse to totally separate oneself from culture to be a necessary, but ultimately inadequate, position. Taking theology as the language about God as well as the study of the one God and also the writing and doctrines on God's work in the world (including creation, redemption, sanctification, human duties and response to it), one sees that the creation of God and humanity in the fallen world are monitored by Godself. For this theology constitutes the language about God.

When one understands culture as the totality of the mental and physical reactions and activities that characterize the behavior of individuals composing a social group collectively and individually in relations to their natural environment, then one finds that Christians within the fallen world can use theology to speak to the cultures of the people which are their reactions and influencers of their behavior towards their (natural) environment. This means that Christ is not to be understood as being against culture, but through the church as his Body, he shows love to the fallen world. Jesus did not invest in the fallen world; he remained holy but lived within it among the people. In summarising this paradigm, Allbee acknowledges as one of its strengths that it does warn against not becoming unduly entangled with fallen culture (Allbee 2005:17-33).

However, this paradigm does not take seriously important fundamental biblical doctrines of (the goodness of) creation, the incarnation, nor the continuity between redemption and creation. Furthermore, its call for separation tends to minimise the potential influence that Christianity may have on the society.

#### 4.5.2. *Christ of Culture*

In this view, according to Niebuhr (1951:83), men and women “hail Jesus as the Messiah of their society, the fulfiller of its hopes and aspiration, the *perfecta* of its true faith, the source of its holiest spirit.” The emphasis is on an essential harmony between Christ and culture. Jesus is seen as the embodiment of the greatest human aspirations, as the ultimate hero of human culture, as representing the very best which culture offers. In short, the very best of human achievement is Christ, and therefore there is little or no difference between loyalty to Christ and the best a particular culture has to offer. According to Niebuhr, when this happens and religion is institutionalised in the culture of a society, the doctrine of creation and God’s headship as well as drawing the presence of God and God’s kingdom closer to what God had created, gives the true picture of God’s love of the world.

Referring to this paradigm, Douglas John Hall (2002:421-427) defines theology as a preparation for the deepest and most vulnerable kind of involvement in the realities of our world. Allbee (2005:17-33) finds here a radical world-affirmation with the goal of completely institutionalising religion in culture. Although it may offer the fullest appreciation of the doctrine of creation and God’s sovereignty, it draws little distinction between culture, Christ and God and God’s kingdom. Its weakness is that it tends towards “simplistic world-affirmation” or a complete “secularizing eschatology” which may all too easily drift into humanism.

#### 4.5.3. *Christ above Culture*

In this view, Niebuhr (1951:117) says, the “battle” between Christ and culture is rather seen as a “battle” between (the holy) God and (sinful) humanity. Christ is Lord of both this world and of the other world and the two cannot be entirely separated. The complexity of Christ as both human and divine is analogous to the complexity within culture, a realm of the holy and the sinful. Christ enters culture from above with gifts that human aspiration has not envisioned and

which human efforts cannot attain unless they relate humans to a supernatural society and a new value-center.

Niebuhr, furthermore, asserts that proponents of this view believe that the grace of God through Christ came to perfect nature and culture and in this way it affirms that creation and culture are good. At first God moved with Abraham in the process of perfecting culture so that in the end God would perfect the fallen world through God's called messengers in the Old Testament and the church in the New Testament. God used culture that God developed in the Jewish people to make Godself known to the world through Christ. The strength of this position is, according to Allbee, an affirmation of the good of creation and culture; the weakness is that its goal to accelerate the transformative power of grace prior to consummation and new creation is essentially unbiblical. In short, this paradigm there is not much of "not yet" in the "already but not yet" theology of Paul (with reference to Phil. 3:13; Col 3:10; Eph. 4:24; 2 Cor. 4:16).

#### *4.5.4 Christ and Culture*

Niebuhr (1951:149) describes the proponents of this view as dualists because of the way in which they recognise the reality of both law and grace, wrath and mercy, revelation and reason, time and eternity. Despite the ongoing reality of sin and corruption within culture, Christians simultaneously operate within both realities, recognising that life will be filled with inevitable contradictions. For example, Christians may need to exercise both the "ethics for regeneration and eternal life" and the "ethics for the prevention of degeneration". But it is precisely within these contradictions and paradoxical locations that God sustains God's people, and works out God's will in mysterious ways.

According to William Wright (2010), while members of this group want to hold together "loyalty to Christ and responsibility for culture", they believe that this cooperation is not the happy balance/union that the "above-culture group" would like people to believe. Though Christ was doing everything within the culture of the Jews, he still recognised the fallenness of the world and condemned some things within Jewish culture. In Jewish religion, there was, for example, the custom of stoning whoever was found committing adultery, but Jesus challenged this. Furthermore, some cultures are oppressive cultures.

#### 4.5.5 *Christ Transformation Culture*

This group can be described as “conversionists”, who have a more “hopeful view toward culture” (Niebuhr 1951:191; see also Yoder 1996). Their theological conviction comes from seeing God as creator, knowing that humanity’s fall was from something good, and that we see God’s dramatic interaction with people in historical human events (1951:194). It recognizes the corruption of culture, but is optimistic and hopeful about the possibility of cultural renewal. Culture is perceived critically as perverted good, but not as inherently evil. Conversion makes it possible for human beings and culture to move from self-centeredness to Christ-centeredness.

Niebuhr claims that Augustine, John Calvin, and F. D. Maurice were exponents of this paradigm. Thus, about human culture they believe it can be “a transformed human life in and to the glory of God” through the grace of God (1951:196).

Important for this study, especially with its reference to so-called consumerist cultures, sociologist James Spickard (2012) points to the need to acknowledge that there may be positive as well as negative elements in culture. He discusses, for example, how the Christian church embraces and may also give new motivation and coherence to cultural elements like agriculture, family life, literacy, conflict resolution, and empowerment. Others the church may strip of their claims to autonomous truth and value, or may use them as vehicles of communication such as philosophy, language and music. Other forms of culture may be created by the church itself like hospitals, organised education and services to the poor, and yet others may be condemned by it, such as pornography and cultic idolatry.

According to this view, to be Christian in the world and witnessing to its culture will require that believers seek creative ways to advocate and live out the loving ethics of God’s kingdom both in their private and public, social lives. This will help to transform culture in line with Christian influence.

This paradigm has much to recommend it. It has more moderate forms, seeking incremental societal progress through Christian influence as Bruce L. Guenther (2005:215-226) reports. According to the latter, more than a few scholars have noted how the vast majority of Christian readers align themselves with this model. Its major strength is its desire to transform culture along Christian lines; its major weakness is that nothing compels it to take seriously the implications of Paul’s radical remarks in 1 Corinthians 7:31 that “the forms of this world is

passing away”, rather it fully directs one to participate in culture and it still does not equate social reforms with Christian witness.

#### *4.5.6 A Sixth Possibility? Christ Witnessing to Culture*

In analysing Richard Niebuhr’s five paradigms on Christ and culture, Allbee (2005) adds another, namely “Christ-Witnessing-to-Culture”. Allbee contends that it is biblically-grounded in that it is found: 1) in the example of Christ’s own witness, 2) in the revelation of Christ’s purpose, 3) and in Christ’s great commission to the church. These foundations also illuminate the content that should inform this witness. The added overall advantage of the “Christ Witnessing to Culture” paradigm is that it is informed by the strengths of the five paradigms.

For this reason Bruce Guenther (2005:215-226) recommends that what is then essential for the church is a model of plurality which acknowledges that varied approaches to culture are appropriate depending on the setting, the strength of the church, the strength of the opposition, the particular issue at hand and the first four types [of Niebuhr’s paradigms] are perhaps best seen as different strategies for accomplishing the transformation or influence of culture described in the fifth type. It can give fullest appreciation to the important biblical doctrines they either neglect or distort.

Returning to Allbee, it’s his proposed sixth paradigm’s primary purpose is to witness. The church/theology is free to separate itself from a fallen world or conversely, to embrace the good and advance it in the world, as wise witness in different situations dictates. The church is also free to take seriously and live out implications of the biblical doctrines from which others fall short. It can give difference to the fundamental doctrines of biblical creation and the fact of the incarnation without overemphasising or overinvesting itself in this present world. Rather it is free to balance its participation in creation and culture with a perspective that correctly views this fallen world as temporary and ultimately passing away. It is committed to things that remain, like love and Christ (1 Cor. 13:13; Col. 1:13-20); it does not reject this world out of hand; and, in being committed to Christian witness, it is free to engage the world supportively or critically, in order to witness to culture, and to create further opportunities for Christian evangelism. The church needs to be deeply concerned with witnessing to their neighbor’s culture by living out its own loving kingdom in everyday life.



## 4.6 Conclusion

Despite critique against Niebuhr's views,<sup>42</sup> the latter does show that the relationship between theology/faith/religion and culture is a complex one and filled with challenges and pitfalls. Bruce Guenther (2005:215-226), for example comments that the critique against and debates on Niebuhr's paradigms have drawn attention to the reality that *Christians cannot divorce themselves from culture*, and to the complexities that are involved as Christians attempt to respond to the "enduring problems" of how to be in "in the world but not of the world". Werner Dietrich (1996) emphatically states that the Christian faith throughout history has characteristically crossed boundaries – cultural, social and spiritual. The one gospel of the liberating love of God was passed on from the Aramaic culture of Palestine to Hellenistic and Roman cultures, and so on from one cultural world to another. He affirms that there is no culture-free way to hear the gospel or to be a Christian. The language and customs within which humanity lives out its Christian faith *can make possible, and deepen, our understanding of Christ's message*, but can also make it difficult or impossible to understand. A critical consciousness that we ourselves are culture-bound, in positive and negative ways, is indispensable, and so is moving on to new and unaccustomed forms of Christianity within the life patterns of our society.

Niebuhr also shows that the relationship between culture and theology may be a positive and mutually enriching one. According to Spickard (2012:19-37), this however requires the acknowledgement that the churches find themselves in the midst of different cultures. Each church has its culturally-grounded interpretation of Scripture and each ought to assume that part of its interpretation embodies cultural differences. For each church, truth only arises from self-reflection. Each church must examine itself to see which parts of its stance is universally Christian and which comes from particularistic cultural attitudes.

Paul Tillich (1955:11-20), another prominent theologian of the twentieth century, believed that it was important for Christians and theologians to think and engage amidst various (Tillich's famous phrase) "boundary situations in life" within the dynamic and promising interplay between the two worlds of Christian faith and modern culture (Tillich's famous method of correlation – theology seeks to correlate the questions being asked by a culture at any given

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<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Schwandt (1990), Spickard (1990), Guenther (2005).

time and the answer offered within the Christian tradition.). Christian theology and its structures and symbols have to speak meaningfully and critically to the burning issues of human life if they were to possess any public relevance (Tillich 1955:59-66). For Tillich, faith and culture need not to be unacceptable to each other. According to Dermot Lane (1993:11), faith that does not become culture if it is not fully accepted by a specific ethnic group, not entirely thought through and not faithfully lived. It is like a tree that cannot bear fruits unless it takes roots in the soil where it has been planted.

In light of the above reflections it is clear that the Nkhoma Synod may – in fact it should – take cognizance of the culture of its members who are predominantly Chewa. This will also be true of an ecotheological stance by the Synod where the latter may be informed by the “[ecological] language and customs within which humanity lives out its Christian faith [in order to] make possible, and deepen, our understanding of Christ’s message” (Dietrich, 1996:148). In fact, examples of how this has happened or has been suggested in the past in the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod exist.<sup>43</sup> In light of the above conclusion, the following chapter will focus on a possible conversation between ecotheology – with reference to Conradie – and Chewa culture.

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<sup>43</sup> Kawale (1998:196), for example, suggests interpreting the divine Hebrew name of the God of Genesis 1 into the names of old traditional religion which may develop strong point of contact between the new biblical faith and the old traditional faith. Kawale (1998:198 see also; Kawale 1996:14-15, 1987:38 and Scott 1929:185) thus put it that *Chiuta* may be transformed to Chewa divine name *Mulungu* because it means “the source or creator of all creation, the fountain of all the living things, humans, animals and plants. Therefore the meaning of Elohim as the Creator of all the elements of nature finds its functional dynamic equivalence in the Chewa language. However, Kawale is of the view that the need remains to give theological meaning of the divine name Elohim so that *Mulungu* takes all the attributes of Elohim i.e. *Mulungu* is the creator of the universe and all the people of the world. He is to be understood as an inclusive and universal creator God. The ethnocentric tendency of *Chiuta*, as suggested by Kawale (1998:198), can be transformed by combination of *Chiuta Mulungu* to enable the Chewa to transform their world view so that *Chiuta* no longer refers to the creator of Chewa only, but as the universal sovereign God like *Mulungu*.

Ott (2000:372-373) describes another example: At the KuNgoni Art and Craft Centre, he tells, Malawian sculptors have designed different Kachere trees carvings representing Christ in conjunction with several different traditional symbols. The Kachere tree has also been used in close association with Christ due to its unique reproductive process. It does not grow directly from the soil, but its seeds are dropped by birds on the branches of other trees. The seeds form descending tendrils that at first cling to the bark of the host tree and then slowly grow down until they take root into the soil. As the process goes on, the host tree is completely enclosed by the sprouts and roots of the new Kachere tree. Finally the two trees melt into one in a symbiotic unity of life. Sometimes the old tree disappears completely as its life passes into that of the new Kachere tree. Here, one sees the archetypal pattern of the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Kachere is seen rooting in another tree with its double movement, first from above to below, then from below to above. The Son of God also comes to earth, becomes man, roots himself in the mother soil of earth, and finally stretches upward to return to his place of origin.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### TOWARDS AN ECOTHEOLOGY FOR THE C.C.A.P. NKHOMA SYNOD – ERNST CONRADIE’S ECOTHEOLOGY MEETS CHEWA CULTURE

#### 5.1 Introduction

In light of the previous two chapters, which reflected upon Ernst Conradie’s ecotheological thought – specifically as it pertains to the current ecological crisis as a spiritual and cultural crisis – and upon what culture, Chewa culture and the relationship between culture and theology/faith may be, the current chapter will ask how the characteristics of Chewa culture resonate with what Conradie identifies as the causes of and possible ecotheological responses to the ecological crisis facing the world. This will be done with a view to see whether, as expressed in the worlds of Dietrich in Chapter Four, language and customs within which, in this case, the Chewa live out their Christian faith *can make possible, and deepen, our understanding of Christ's [ecological] message*, in any future endeavor of C.C.A.P Nkhoma Synod to formulate an ecotheological response and on behalf of its members. As such this chapter will follow Conradie’s thought as discussed in Chapter Two and in each instance will bring it into conversation with Chewa cultural perspectives and/or C.C.A.P theological perspectives. In the first part of the chapter this will be done with reference to some of the general theological principles that Conradie identifies in his ecotheological work and then, in the second part of the chapter, specifically with regard to Conradie’s focus on the consequences of consumerism. The chapter will end by giving an overview of the findings in this study and some suggestions as to a possible way forward.

#### 5.2. Conradie, Chewa Culture and the Nkhoma Synod’s Response to the Ecological Crisis:

##### *5.2.1 Point of Departure: The Meaning of “Church” According to Conradie*

Conradie (2008:11-23) understands the Christian church as referring, at its most basic level, to individual Christians everywhere, acting according to the gospel commands of being the light to and the salt of the earth. The church, furthermore, refers to the local congregation, as a community that worships together during its Sunday liturgy, and as the Body of Christ that is present and active in the world by way of its various organised ministries. For Conradie, the

church also refers a denomination with its leadership. As a denomination it is responsible for developing programs and projects and for taking decisions pertaining to the denomination at regional, national and international levels. At the latter level, the church in its relationships and cooperation with other denominations and traditions, functions in the ecumenical sphere. And, according to Conradie, at all these levels and in all its manifestations the gospel demands regarding the use and care for creation should be addressed and should be on the agenda of the church. This forms part of the wider duty of the church to address social issues – the ecological crisis being one of these issues.

Question 36 of the *Buku la Katekisisima*<sup>44</sup> of the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod describes the Church as: *Mpingo wa Ambuye* (The Church of the Lord), *Gulu la anthu Ambuye Yesu* (Community of the Lord Jesus), *Gulu la Osankhidwa ndi Mulungu* (The Elect of God), *Gulu La Nkhosa* (The Flock of God), *Kachisi wa Mulungu* (The Temple of God), *Gulu la Mulungu* (The People of God), *Yerusalemu wa Tsopano* (The New Jerusalem), *Mkwatibwi* (The Bride of Christ), *Banja la Bwino* (A good Family), *Thupi la Khristu* (The Body of Christ). All of these terms or phrases reflect the community of believers in their relationship to God or to one another.

Theologically the Church is also understood by the Nkhoma Synod as each local congregation and as a worshipping community. Every Sunday its members gather to worship

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<sup>44</sup> Zeze (2012:86-87) explains that the *Buku La Katekisisima* (catechism) may be understood as a fourth doctrinal standard of the Nkhoma Synod even if not officially acknowledged as such. It plays an important role in the instruction of new converts and in the preparation of sermons. It is also considered as a by-product of the Heidelberg Catechism. According to Pauw, the first edition of the *Buku La Katekisisima* was prepared in 1892 (Pauw, 1980:329). In 1916, a three-man committee was appointed to revise the new catechism and to extend it (Pauw 1980:327). Between 1922 and 1923, some notes and appendices were prepared and added to last edition. The notes were expanded further and added to the later editions. The *Buku La Katekisisima* was prepared for the following three purposes: First, it must enable new converts to learn and understand the doctrines of the Nkhoma Synod (*Buku La Katekisisima* 1968:V, 3); second, it is meant to deepen the theological knowledge of Church members, which they receive before baptism; third, it is meant for the building up of the Church. In this regard, the Church is a building that requires strong roof made of good timber: Note the references to nature in the following explanation taken from the Catechism: “*Milimo yonse iri kuthengo, koma munthu wofuna kumanga nyumba afunafuna mirimo yonse tsatanetsatane. Chimodzimodzinso maphunziro awa m' Katekisisima alongosola mawu onse kuti adziwike bwino. Ayamba ndi mawu apa zoipa, napitirila ndi mawu apa chipulumutso, natsiriza ndi mawu apa kuyamika.*” (A person goes to the forest and carefully fetches good timber for the roof of his house. Likewise, the lessons in this Catechism have been orderly and precisely explained all the subjects. The subjects begin with teaching on sin and misery, proceeds with the teachings on redemption and gratitude); fourth and finally, it also serves as one of the textbooks in the training of student pastors at Josophat Mwale Theological Institute. In 1957, the Nkhoma Synod and the Reformed Church of Zambia formed a joint committee to translate the Heidelberg Catechism into Chichewa, which serves as the present Nkhoma Synod Catechism.

according to the liturgy formulated by Nkhoma Synod in line with a yearly liturgical program running from the 1<sup>st</sup> of January to the 31<sup>st</sup> of December. The Church also refers to the denomination as represented by its top leadership called the Moderamen that speaks on behalf of members at regional, national and international level. As such, structurally, the Nkhoma Synod has the opportunity and ability to speak and should speak on social issues at all levels, from the most basic local to the ecumenical, international level. Interestingly enough, as was seen, in a study by Brown, it was shown how the governing system of the C.C.A.P Nkhoma Synod already reflects traditional ways of decision-making in Chewa society (cf. Brown 2004:78 and Chapter 4, section 4.4.4).

It is also interesting that the idea of the whole community as worshipping community was also found in Chewa traditional religion. The whole village was understood to constitute a worshipping community whenever it was time to appeal to or appear before the supreme being (*Chiuta Mulungu*), whether they gathered together as community or an whether an individual person, like the *Makewana*, *Mbona*, or *Chauwa* acted on behalf of the community as a whole to worship, intercede or offer sacrifices (Van Breughel 2001:50, see also Ott 2000:166-167, and Longwe, 2007). At other times, the whole village would also participate, for example, in the annual rituals of mountain burning at the Bunda and Kaphirintiwa mountains. As such, some of the manifestations of what constitutes “the church” as a community with its leadership is not only reflected in the views and structures of the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod, but also already resonates with one of the basic points of departure in the ecotheological views of Conradie.

### 5.2.2 *God the Creator, Provider and the Owner of All in Harmony with the All*

Conradie emphasises that the earth belongs to God that God is the provider of everything good for both human beings as well as for all of nature. The earth is home to both humanity, nature and God (Conradie 2011a:95). The earth also needs to be cared for by humanity as God’s stewards. In this vein, Conradie and Field (2000:39-40) refers to the Pentateuch, which begins in Genesis 1 with the dramatic portrayal of God’s creation of all and includes the regular affirmation by God that all God had created was good.

Conradie (2011a:95) further asserts that, when looking at Genesis 2, God’s purpose for creation is revealed in the account of a fertile and beautiful garden where humanity lived in fellowship with God and in harmony with the other creatures. However, this harmony is

shattered as Adam and Eve disobeyed God and it resulted in the distortion of the relationship between God and humanity, between human beings themselves, and between humanity and the rest of creation. The creation narrative then continues to the flood narrative in Genesis 6-9 where God acts by using the forces of nature to punish the sin of humanity.

In an essay (2005c), Conradie refers to what he calls the “Apologetic Approach” of theologians in which they attempt to retrieve a more harmonious relationship between humanity and nature from the biblical roots and subsequent history of Christianity. It is apologetic in the sense that it defends the value of the Bible and Christian faith for an environmental praxis against the famous critique (e.g. of Lynn White and others – see Chapter Three, section 3.3) that Christianity bears a “huge burden of guilt” for the ecological crisis. The thrust of this model is to move beyond a theology of dominion (over creation) toward a theology of stewardship and service (towards creation). Conradie (2005c:156-170) is in favor of the latter and says that human beings must be regarded as the stewards, caretakers, priests, custodians or guardians of creation, who have the task of “tending the garden” with wisdom and respect. According to Conradie, harmony should therefore not exist only between God and humankind, but it has to extend to the whole creation.

It was seen in Chapter Four, that the concepts of *creation*, *fall* and the *reestablishment of harmony* are not foreign to Chewa traditional religion. The Chewa myths of creation and of a fall in fact resonate with the Genesis story. As Van Breughel (2001:25) explains, according to these myths, at Kaphirimtiwa in Malawi, the Chewa was said to find mysterious markings, resembling the footprints of people, animals and writings on rocks (Nthara 2009:9, see also Ott 2000:159). As a result, a creation and fall myth developed among the Chewa themselves as Kaphirimtiwa was seen as the place where creation took place. With the first man and woman appeared pairs of all animals as well as *Chiuta Mulungu* himself, who was accompanied by the first rains. During this first period *Chiuta Mulungu*, men and animals, lived together in peace. This harmony was, however, destroyed when humankind invented fire, which set the grass ablaze and caused animals flee before it. *Chiuta Mulungu* was rescued by a spider, which spun a thread along which *Chiuta* climbed to the sky. Thus driven away by the wickedness of humanity, as a result, *Chiuta* proclaimed that people would die and join him in the sky where he would be making cloud of rain in order to quench the fires which he had invented. The Supreme Being *Chiuta Mulungu* exists forever; he sends rain; he gives life to everything; he gives sun to whole earth. Although



*Chiuta* belongs to the unseen spiritual world, his attributes show that he is very close to his creation (Breugel 2001:29).

The belief in a Creator of and Provider for humanity and nature are also part of the basic belief of the Nkhoma Synod. Besides for its standards of faith, the *Malongosoledwe Amu Mpingo* (liturgy of 1974) formulated by the Nkhoma Synod, which the whole Church follows every Sunday, proclaims the belief in God as Creator of all:

Let's stand and start to worship God; Our help is from God, the maker of Heavens and Earth, beloved in the Lord Jesus Christ Grace mercy and peace from God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit be upon you from now and forever...

In its standards of faith, the Nkhoma Synod also confesses God as the Creator and Provider. In a sense it may thus be said that the attributes of *Chiuta Mulungu* have been transformed to a Christian theological understanding and are thus not foreign to the Chewa, neither traditionally nor in Christian theological terms. However, as was seen in Chapter One with regard to the motivation and background to this study, creation narratives are rarely employed in sermons of pastors or lay preachers with reference to ecological issues. In fact, the emphasis mostly falls on the fall and condemnation of humanity and the resultant destruction of the relationship between God and humankind only, without also applying it to the rest of creation.

Similarly, what is found in catechism lessons is a focus on three areas: 1) the fall of humanity, their sinfulness and punishment, 2) the salvation of humanity through the death of Jesus, and 3) good works of thanksgiving for what God provides to humanity (such as salvation and daily provisions). Although these emphases are central to the Christian faith, it should also allow for reflection on how the fall of humanity has impacted on the good creation of God, i.e. its relationship to the current ecological crisis; how all human activities are aimed at the fulfillment of human needs. Both the memory of the Chewa people of the origins of life and death as well the restoration of the relationship between God, humankind and nature may serve well to change the consciousness of people regarding the current ecological crisis.

### 5.2.3. *The Interconnectedness of God, Humanity and Creation*

It must first be emphasized that the earth, the home of all of creation including humankind, is sacred before and for God the Creator. Conradie (2011a:95) points out that the earth is sacred

gift from God, and that all God created is. As John Calvin (Hugh 1989, *Institutes* 5.III.1) puts it, it is “the theatre of the God’s glory”. According to Conradie, Christian ecological theologies fall into two different types: covenantal or sacramental. The sacramental tradition draws on the Bible and on patristic and medieval mysticism to speak to the heart, says Conradie. The interconnectedness of humanity and nature is highlighted in a sacramental approach. The integrity of creation is regarded as sacred and it must therefore be protected by way of an ecological vision and ethos of the church. In short, comments Conradie (2011a:95), the earth is seen here a gift from God that has to be treasured and preserved because God’s own presence may be detected in nature as attested to in the Old Testament and New Testament.

The covenantal tradition emphasises a commitment to right relationships within the earth’s community, i.e. responsible stewardship. In Chapter Three we have seen how Conradie and Field (2000:39) describe the covenantal view with reference to the goal of Exodus in the Old Testament, namely that God will lead the people into a new land flowing with milk and honey, a land characterised by fertility and ecological abundance. When the children of Israel were in the wilderness, God gave them laws to govern their lives as a nation. These laws regulated not only the relationship between God and people and between people themselves, but also between people and the rest of creation. The health of the land was provided for by the laws pertaining to Sabbatical years (Ex. 23:10-11 and Lev 25), specific laws for the care of plants (Lev. 19:23-25 and Deut. 20:19-20) and animals (Ex. 20:8-11, 23:4, 5, 10-11 and Deut. 22:1-4,6-7). This close relationship between God, humans and nature is also found in biblical prophetic literature where judgment falls on the king of Babylon and the land and the trees also rejoice (Isa. 14:3-8, see also Ps. 98). As the prophets looked forward to the redemption of Israel, they described the natural world as sharing in that redemption (e.g. Isa. 11:6-9) 35:1-3, 5-7, Ezek. 36, 47:1-12, and Amos 9:11-15) (cf. Conradie (2011a:71-80).

The Israelites were warned that failure to keep these laws would result in the being thrown off of the land (Lev. 26:14-45). In fact, it may be concluded that the whole Pentateuch in fact describes a covenant relationship that unites God, the people of Israel and the land. The notion of a biotic community (Conradie 2011a:69) suggest that moral concern should be expanded to include air, water, soil, plants and animals, or collectively the “land”. The land does not belong to humanity, but humanity belongs to the land, humanity is not living on the earth, but humanity is part of the earth’s biosphere (Conradie 2011a:71). Humanity forms part of the land



and lives from the earth. The well-being of the earth transcends all of humanity because it is something bigger than human's own interests.

As was seen, the importance of land in Chewa culture cannot be overemphasised. It is the most important form of property that a citizen of a village may have. A sense of belonging to a village becomes permanent only when one or a family has been given a permanent piece of land by the chief. Most importantly, in Chewa culture, the land is owned by the *Chalos-eni nthaka* – traditional chiefs-owners of that specific land via ancestral heritage, but it was *god* (*Chiuta Mulungu*), who first gave the land as a gift to the ancestors (cf. Nthara 2009:25-27).

As a traditionally agricultural society, farming remains the main economic source of income in Malawi and in particular for the Chewa. Nature as the gift of care for humanity is also found in traditional Chewa culture. As such, land given to a family is viewed as a mother who cares for that family's needs. Fulata Moyo (2002:49) thus comments that: "From our cultural perspective, the land is like a mother who takes care of her children by providing them with the necessary provisions for their sustenance from her own resources." As such, destroying land among the Chewa may be seen as destroying one's mother. This strong image of care, dependence and closeness also resounds with the care, dependence and closeness between humanity and creation as found in biblical traditions.

Furthermore, as was seen in Chapter Two, within the local context of behaviour that contributes to ecological degradation – such as uncontrolled tree felling or overgrazing – Chewa members of the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod may need reminding that not only according to their culture, but also in terms of biblical principles (i.e. the protection of Israel in the wilderness), God not only demands the protection of fellow human beings, but also of animal and plants.

In the New Testament, Conradie reminds us, Jesus begins his ministry in the company of wild animals in the desert (Mk. 1:13) providing a preliminary fulfillment of Isaiah's vision (Isa. 11:6-9). During his life, Jesus often left the crowds to go *into the hills* to pray. And, just before the crucifixion, Jesus poured out his soul to his Father in a garden called Gethsemane. Jesus' teachings confirm God's care for creatures in the sayings about the lilies (Mt. 6:28-30) and the sparrows (Mt. 10:29-31). Jesus himself cursed an unfaithful fig tree; he used earth to heal the blind man. The healing of the sick takes place by use of soil, water (Luke 4:18-19).

The above examples are significant for this study in light of the fact that in Chewa culture some trees are regarded as the dwelling place of the spirits of ancestors as well of the supreme

being.<sup>45</sup> As was seen, these trees are highly honored and well cared for. Even more, according to Longwe (2007:21), all the names of the Chewa god are related directly to the natural phenomena: to rain, to creation, or to the god's sustaining power. These names also relate to the agricultural activities of the Chewa. As was noted, the interaction of the people with the spirits, who spoke to the supreme spirit on their behalf, is usually done under ancestral trees, which, too, are signs of the unity between sky and earth, the supreme spirit and human beings. The existence of these examples of traditional views of the interconnectedness of the divine, humanity and nature may assure the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod that a cultural sensitivity to this important relationship also exists among its members.

#### 5.2.4. *The Ecological Crisis as Result of the Fall of Humankind: A Need for Repentance*

A major concern of Conradie's (2008:81-82) is that humanity is destroying nature for selfish reasons as humans believe that the universe was created solely for them. That God is the Creator and Owner of creation was addressed in 5.2.2 above. However, Conradie further explains that the problem is – in Christian terms and with reference to Genesis 3:17-24 and Romans 3:23 – relates to the devastating impact of human sin on society. This is, as has been shown, part of Conradie's conviction that the ecological crisis is also a spiritual crisis (2005a:281-343). Conradie comments that what is therefore needed, is an act of repentance by humanity as well as a renewed attempt to view ourselves, one another, and the world around us from the perspective of the divine design for creation (Conradie 2010:20).

In Chewa traditional religion, misfortunes were always associated with sin against *Chiuta Mulungu*, just as death seen as a consequence of humans destruction of *Chiuta Mulungu's* creation with fire (Ott 2000:301-3). Whenever the ancestral fathers would sense disaster due to their own sins, the *Chilowa* was to intercede in prayer on behalf of the entire society. This prayer would include the mention of *Chiuta Mulungu's* different names while standing still for hours. The *Chilowa* would pray: “please *Chisumphu*. *Leza*, pardon, *Nanjiri*, pardon, *Mphambe*, pardon, we have come to beg you, pardon, see how the people are dying with hunger, pardon, *Chauta*, pardon, *Mangadzi*”. This was then the act of repentance by the community.

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<sup>45</sup> This in itself resonates with what Conradie calls the sacramental type of ecological theology according to which God's own presence may be detected in nature.

As was shown repeatedly, the church must address social issues. It should work towards the change the hearts of its members and it should redirect them toward God. In the process, it has the responsibility to explain the current social problems theologically, but also to guide its members toward repentance where they themselves have by way of their actions or lifestyles contributed to the social ills that face society. When Nehemiah heard that other Jews were in great trouble, disgraced and that the walls of Jerusalem had been burnt, he repented on behalf of fellow-Jews and then led them to restoration of the people and the walls (Neh. 1:2-2:20)

This resonates with Chewa culture's repentance rituals before the *Chiuta Mulungu*, and shows that a similar sensitivity exists within Chewa culture, and as such it is a sensitivity that the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod may take cognizance of in its theological reflection on the need for repentance with regard to ecologically-harmful practices and traditions.

#### 5.2.5. *The Problem of Knowledge/Information*

According to Conradie (2010:19), one of the main problems in the context of the ecological crisis is not so much a lack of information and planning with regard to understanding the current crisis itself, but rather knowledge of and understanding *the end results of the crisis*.

In the case of the Chewa and Nkhoma Synod, it may however be both a lack of information, planning and understanding the crisis as well as a lack of information on what the end results of the ecological crisis may be. It is a sad fact that the issue of knowledge and information still remains an obstacle for the Nkhoma Synod with regard to the ecological crisis. In 1996, the Synod asked me, the researcher, to prepare a Bible lesson on "the Church and environment", which was to be discussed in all twelve presbyteries in the Synod. However, some pastors complained that the Synod was getting involved in worldly issues which should rather be tackled by government, specifically by the latter's forestry department. This view and negative attitude to the issue was also found among some elders. To my knowledge, no in-depth discussion concerning environment has ever taken place at any level in the Synod. It is thus clear that there is still a need for information on the ecological crisis.

Conradie (2011c:162) also appeals to "...local congregation to prove that it is concerned with environmental crisis, before getting deeply involved in environmental projects; it has to get its own house in order." This, too should be the case for the Nkhoma Synod, but it has the

advantage that, thanks to Chewa culture, its members already should have some ecological sensitivity which may offer fertile ground for its ecotheological message.

As was seen in the previous chapter, the Chewa entrusted and still view girls and women as the custodians of their (Chewa) culture, traditions and customs. The role of women should therefore not be underestimated in the process of conscientising the Chewa to both their ecologically positive and negative cultural practices. As such the Chewa should remain conscious of the traditional saying that: *Tizisamala zinthu zomwe Chiuta Mulungu watipatsa panthaka yathu kudzela kwa makolo athu chifukwa ndizo tsogolo la ana anthu, komanso chuma cha ana athu* (Whatever we inherited from the *Chiuta Mulungu* through our ancestors on our land is the future of our children and wealth of our future generations). This culture of receiving moral instruction can be utilised by Nkhoma Synod with a view to environmental preservation. In light of the following comment by Msangaambe (2011:65), this not only concerns women and girls, but in the church also pastors and lay leadership as:

...the influence of lay leaders is evident in the field of Christian education. While the clergy take responsibility to train Sunday school and catechumen teachers, the role of monitoring the actual teaching lies in the hands of lay leaders. Their influence can be traced in their choice of the right people to teach. Some of the Church elders even volunteer to teach. Again, the influence is evident in the recommendations that they make for a catechumen member to advance from one level to the next. Among the five Synods of the CCAP, the Nkhoma Synod is the most outstanding with their emphasis on, and seriousness about, *chilangizo* (moral instructions) as part of the Christian education. Lay leaders – both male and female – do all this work.

Ecological lessons and teaching may thus be incorporated in the *Chilangizo cha anyamata ndi asungwana* (the moral instructions for boys and girls) programs, which are presented four times in a year and is mostly done by trained lay leaders.

### **5.3. Conradie on Consumerism and the Ecological Crisis: Fact or threat in Malawi?**

In Chapter Three it was noted that Conradie sees consumerism as a root cause of the ecological crisis. Before one may ask whether there are elements in Chewa culture that may respond to consumerism as a cause to the ecological crisis, a short detour must be taken in order to ascertain

whether it at all relevant to the Malawian context. As was seen in Chapter Two of this study, Malawi is a poor country where the majority of the citizens live in rural communities. In other words, is consumerism a fact or a threat in Malawi, and if so, how may Conradie's views and those of Chewa culture inform a C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod response to it? In order to do so, an overview of the history and spread of consumerism globally and in Africa needs to be given.

### ***5.3.1 Historical Overview of Consumerism***

#### *5.3.1.1 The Origins of Consumerism in the West*

In some parts of the world, consumerism is not a new phenomenon at all. However, *rampant* consumerism and *global* consumerism is. As was seen in Chapter Two, according to Stephen Mosely (2010:1, 4), for thousands of years humanity have been modifying its environment in order to survive. For the most part of the past 4 million years, large-scale environmental transformation was the product of natural forces such as the continental drifts, volcanic eruptions, and natural changes in climatic conditions. Long before modern consumerism, poverty and subsistence-levels of economic activity constrained any form of consumerist lifestyle (Stearns 2006:4). In ancient societies major religions also often focused on spiritual, other-worldly goals and argued that worldly goods detracted one from the true purpose of earthly life, which should be directed at salvation toward a life to come. According to Mosley, low levels of consumerist lifestyle could only be found from about 800 BCE in small pockets of very specific societies, namely in aristocratic communities in places such as China,<sup>46</sup> Athens, Rome and Carthage. This was amongst other things due to a greater abundance of weaponry that ensured acquisition beyond ordinary necessities of life, but only for some.

Over time the humanly-transformed environment begun to rival the natural environment because of an increase in human needs and demands. According to Mosley (2010:5), this initiated the growing pressure on natural resources that lead to a slow but sure loss of biodiversity (due to increased hunting and more effective hunting methods and weapons). This was also intensified by the clearing of forests, the degrading of soil and, over time, urban-industrial growth and the development of cities with its accompanying air and water pollution as

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<sup>46</sup> Stearns (2006:81) explains that pre-modern consumerism developed more extensively in China and the Middle East than in the Western Europe, and was depended on international trade – for example, in Chinese silk.

the inevitable trade-offs for continued economic growth worldwide. Historically, Mosley affirms, the current crisis has been fueled by imperialism/colonialism, trade and commerce, progression of technology and the general advance of so-called civilization.

According to Stearns (2006:17), in the West, accelerated international trade, urbanism and the growing markets for sugar, clothing, body beautifying items, and household items, in late-medieval Britain, Germany, France and Italy, accompanied by improved roads and transportation to the known parts of the world, brought about the first society-wide emergence of consumerism. It was accompanied by changes in ways goods were sold, in the variety of goods available and coveted, and in the goals people defined for their daily lives.

According to the Worldwatch Institute (2010:13), it was in the late-1600s that societal shifts occurred in Europe that lay the groundwork for the emergence of consumerism in that part of the world. Expanding populations, combined with a weakening of traditional sources of authority such as the church and community structures, meant that a young person's customary path of social advancement via inheriting the family plot or apprenticing in a father's trade could no longer be taken for granted. Stearns also asserts that at the time the need for comfort expanded into increased consumerism. Senses were growing more refined, and more attuned to delight; as a consequence, desires broadened and wishes for everything that was rare, that may gratify the senses, adorn the body, and promote ease, pleasure and pomp of life also increased (Stearns, 2006:24). With the advent of Romanticism in countries like Britain, German and France in late seventeen century, emotion, individualism and moral and physical beauty became even more accentuated. By this time, people saw in consumerism a means of expressing their essence as individuals and a way to stimulate love. As such, consumerism became associated with love and sexuality. In Europe, the eighteenth century again was the scene of massive social and economic changes and rampant industrialisation and production. Some Western countries outside of Europe, particularly America (white Americans) imitated the lifestyles in European's exploding of consumerism.

Stearns (2006:47) also refers to changes in consumerism apparatus from shops and wordy advertisements to new retail outlets and still-more manipulative advertising styles. Ranges of goods increased as leisure entered the consumer orbit. People sought new avenues for establishing their identity and for self-fulfillment, and the acquisition and use of goods became popular substitutes for fulfilment and traditional identity markers. The Christian reaction to

consumerist lifestyles in eighteenth century, therefore, often attacked greed, gluttony, envy, and the pursuit of “false gods”. However, consumerism did not end then, in fact, it spread globally by means of “Westernisation”, as Stearns calls it (2006:80).

In an interesting study, McCracken (1988) identifies three moments in history that underlies the development of modern consumer culture in Britain. The *first* was Elizabethan politics in sixteenth-century England, where Elizabeth I introduced the use of objects to her highly ceremonial court to communicate the legitimacy of her rule. The *second* was the increased participation of the masses in the marketplace in eighteenth-century in Europe. As more members of society could participate in the marketplace because of the increased prosperity (of some) and due to the industrial revolution, the marketplace expanded, creating an explosion of consumer choices. The gentry, the middle class, and the lower class adopted views on the social significance of goods and attempted to appropriate these for themselves. Such high and middle class people, when employed by the Foreign Service in the British colonies, took these views with them. Finally, McCracken notes the *third* moment as the institutionalization of consumption through the emergence of the department store in the nineteenth century. McCracken argues that the department store fundamentally changed the nature and the context of purchase activity as well as the nature of the information and influence to which the consumer was subjected.

According to Woodard (2012:14) “super marketing” was the hallmark of the post-war United States “system of free enterprise” that offered a new model of industrial beauty to war-weary, tradition-bound European consumers. Later shopping centers were established starting in America and then in other parts of the world and American transnational marketing has been the means of spreading consumer culture globally by use of consumer brands. Furthermore, according to Woodard, while in 1900 a total 1.5 trillion USD was spent by public and private consumers. By 1975 it was estimated at 12 trillion USD. By 1998 it doubled to 24 trillion and 24% of the world’s people living in rich countries account for 86% of total consumer spending. In comparison, the average African household today consumes 25% less than 25 years ago. In 2005, China used 25% of the world’s steel, 32% of rice and 24% of cement. Though their per-capita resource consumption is low, with their large populations China and India look set soon to join the US and Europe as superpowers of consumption. With increased globalisation it leaves the poor and poor societies increasingly envious of the power to consume way beyond everyday needs. No wonder, that consumerist globalisation is increasingly leading to what Conradie



(2009:59) calls a “psychological cancer” in the minds of the poor as they embrace consumerist culture and consumer brands but without resources to do so.

Among poor countries on other continents the above tendency is already, and perhaps much more clearly visible than in Africa. An example which one may learn from is contemporary Indonesia where, according to Beng-Huat Chua (1998:981-1000), the presence of televisions in practically every Indonesian home is a sign of the emergence of a culture of consumerism. In that country, as in many others, mass media programming, flowing primarily from United States of America, has played a major role in the creation, learning, and sharing of consumption symbols in that country (Appadurai 1990:295-310). Appadurai (1990:295-310) also affirms that traditions in Indonesia are destroyed by this Westernisation and Americanisation though the influx of foreign capital in search of an export production platform and government-owned enterprises. Modern brand names of consumer goods such as clothes, household items and foodstuffs can be seen American-owned chain stores everywhere. This is especially prevalent in Singapore, where Singaporeans (especially the youth) are now attracted to new lifestyles (Featherstone, 1995:75). Individuality is expressed through the ways in which fashionable items are configured on one’s own body. Globalised and Americanized consumerism it seems are robbing the youth of their identity by making them materialistic (Chua 2012:981-1000).

#### *5.3.1.2 The History of Consumerism in Africa*

The elements of consumerism in Africa and its interest in Western goods go far back in African history (Stearns 2006:115). Stearns reports that as in other societies, in Africa the advent of modern consumerism was closely associated with exposure to Western contacts, though there was a pre-Western market history in Africa as well. Before imperialism, says Stearns (2006:116), sub-Saharan Africa had a lively merchant tradition dating back to days of the great Sudanic kingdoms in West Africa, and Swahili towns on the east African coast. Much of the trade was international, bringing African raw materials and slaves to the Middle East, and Middle Eastern or North African manufactured goods and horses in return. What were usually found on local markets were food, cloth and metal wares.

New contacts with Western European traders began in the fifteenth and sixteenth century, resulting in the massive and terrible Atlantic slave trade in exchange for products. As Stearns



comments, the European goods were valued not because they were superior to African goods, but because of their novelty value. Later conspicuous consumption among the rich and powerful, successful traders, artisans and commercial farmers began to be noticed. According to Stearns, some chiefs gained power through the extent of their possessions, clearly pointing toward consumerist tendencies. However, the late-nineteenth century also saw increased economic exploitation of many African nations, limiting their consumer potential. And as in most societies, economic and social divisions colored the response to consumerism.

Contact with the West was also increased through missionaries, who, for example, promoted Western-style clothing. New tastes were being cultivated. Western and Eastern merchants set up shops in rural centers offering a range of goods and increasing interest in consumer gains. Some Africans profited from commercial agriculture, gaining new wealth and with it, new opportunities to demonstrate a new status by higher levels of consumption (Stearns 2006:115). By the 1920s and 1930s some newly-rich African merchants and farmers lived in Western-style houses, sometimes owned Western art and the occasional automobile. Western-style clothing, perfumes, bicycles, sewing machines and many luxurious goods drew the attention of even poorly-paid migrants, of mining and commercial agricultural workers. Those who were indulging in such lifestyles were called “new people” in some African societies.

However, Stearns also notes that this lifestyle was seen by some Africans and in some local villagers as a threat to their traditions of communality and solidarity. As such, consumerism did not advance at as fast a rate as elsewhere. According to Stearns, some Africans viewed cities as wildernesses or places for whites. Workers wanted money as a temporary and expedient way to buy land or cattle and to permit marriage and then to return to fully agricultural life. Here distinctive values constrained consumerism for the African majority. In fact, according to Stearns (2006:119), consumerism in some places became a central issue in a war between change and tradition, between the individual and communal. For this reason, some African colonies even boycotted European merchants in the 1920s to 1930s.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> James Woodard (2012) refers to two large American companies (that of General Motors Corporation (GM, the world’s second-largest advertiser) and the J. Walter Thompson Company (JWT, Madison Avenue’s top-billing advertising agency), that in the mid-1920s already agreed opening offices in every country in which GM maintained assembly operations. The aim was to expand the offices called “the central institution of consumer culture” to audiences in Africa, Asia, Continental Europe, and South America. According to Woodard, the multinational advertising agency and commercial television, like modern advertising itself, was one of many inventions of the twentieth-century consumer culture. The

Still, many Westerners had one motive in trading with Africans. Stearns (2006:119) refers to J. E. Maroun's express statement in 1960 that marketing in Africa was to:

Create needs, sell solutions to problems, and make people desire what you have to sell... From the outset, we must realize that almost all our efforts in African market should be designed predominantly to change culture – the traditional way of doing things – and in some instances even to introduce ideas which are foreign to and contradict tradition and, therefore, will meet with resistance... We are offering the African new solutions to his problems and in many cases even new problems.

Stearns reports that in the second half of the previous century advertisement campaigns in Africa increased (for example, when launching a new washing detergent in Zimbabwe in 1969, a marketing firm used a helicopter to drop leaflets over villages to inform about the new product!). In all, even if some African countries resisted consumerist culture, as early as the 1930s, many colonial regimes began to deliberate promoting consumerism directly, realizing that if Africans could change their consuming habits, sales would go up (Stearns 2006:123). Stearns quotes an official in Rhodesia at that time (then part of a federation between that included Rhodesia and Nyasaland, now Malawi):

As long as the native have no wants they will not and need not work... Create for him [sic] as many wants as possible and induce him to adopt more modern methods of cultivation and tear him away from his beer pots (2006:123).

But what is the situation in Malawi, what are the ecological implications or threatening ecological implications of this, and what may be done about the situation, theologically?

First of all, it must be noted, that even in Malawi, the signs of encroaching consumer culture can be seen; mostly restricted to urban centers and especially to the urban youth. However, in light of the overview given above, and in the view of scholars like Satish Tandon (2014) globalisation and Americanisation and their accompanying consumerism are unstoppable, and probably unavoidable. For this reason, scholars like Murray and Ozanne (1991:129-144) plead that humanity must be emancipated from this by developing a reflexive distance from marketers'

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first advertising television in Africa was opened in February, 1954 in Casablanca, Morocco. In the 1960s Britain opened a commercial television station in Rhodesia serving also Malawi, the then Nyasaland.

codes placed on the brands and commodities. It may therefore be only a question of time that even in the poor rural communities in Malawi may fall victim to the global consumer culture and with it, as Conradie showed, the ecological challenges that accompany it. What then may a theological response to this be by the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod and what and how may it tap into traditional Chewa culture to respond to this threat?

#### **5.4 Conradie's Ecotheological Thought on Consumer Culture and its Implications for the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod and Chewa Culture**

As was seen in Chapter Three of this study, Conradie (2010c:17) asserts that the root cause of the environmental crisis is the culture of consumerism, pertaining to the dominant global economic systems and the cultural values supporting it. This constitutes, to Conradie, a deeper, cultural crisis and indeed a failure of culture which involves much more than ecosystems, but indeed the human heart. Conradie (2010c:114) agrees with the term “money pantheism” to describe the way in which the power of (or even lack of) money turns everything else into means towards the ultimate end of obtaining more – money, power, status and pleasure. Conradie sees greed as the rapacious craving for more goods or wealth than one needs or deserves. Greed also enslaves people and destroys the communal nature of societies. Conradie (2010c:57) identifies three manifestations of greed namely: “the excessive desire for acquiring possessions, the desire for hoarding money and the closely related vice of covetousness which includes the desire for possessions of others”. People give in to what Conradie calls (2010c:67) “mimetic desire”, that is they start desiring consumer goods not for the goods themselves but merely because other people desire them.

Consumerism may now even be described as “the ideology of our time” and a “civil religion” (Conradie 2010c:111). The consumer world has reached the stage of attributing to consumerism and the markets characteristics traditionally ascribed to God: an omniscient and almighty god, who is the origin of everything that is valuable (Conradie 2010c:113-115). For Conradie, consumerism is the most successful religion of all times. It is winning converts more quickly than any other previous belief system or value-system in human history, converts worshipping the body, pleasure, excitement, money and so forth. Conradie cautions Christians that market capitalism is becoming the first truly world religion, binding all corners of the globe more and more tightly into a worldview and set of values whose religious role Christians

overlook only because we insist on seeing them as “secular”. The danger is, as Conradie (2010c:112) reiterates, whoever gives him- or herself over to a consumerist lifestyle cannot give proper priority to rest, recreation, joy, or prayer. Even if they manage to place God somewhere into the scheme of things, they remain trapped because God is treated as one good among many.

At a different level, as was seen, Conradie (2010c:52) warns against the consumer culture’s demands through advertising and the media for what and how much should be produced and consumed. These demands place a burden on consumers themselves. Members of a consumer society have to work extra hard to maintain their lifestyles; they have to increase security; they have the burden of keeping up with the Jones’s, the addiction to luxuries, the ideal of a single family home and automobile, the lack of satisfaction that consumerism brings, the experience of having more and enjoying less. In the end they cannot differentiate between wealth and well-being, between standards of living and levels of income or of consumption (Conradie 2010c:53-54).<sup>48</sup> Wealth among the consumer class have even paved the way for a “culture of contentment” which, in countries like USA, is normally tied up with protection of financial interests, political power, the control of media and military security. It goes without saying that part of the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod’s reflection and message regarding the ecological crisis should include reflections on the nature, growth and dangers of consumerist lifestyles, even if in places in its constituency it still is only a threat, if not a reality.

However, one must also take note of Stearns’ (2006:123) view that, with their strong peasant roots, many African societies have for long vigorously emphasised family and community solidarity. As a result, comments Stearns, both widespread poverty and communal goals could limit consumerist gains. If this is true, how does Chewa culture reflect this community solidarity and communal ties which may in turn be emphasised by the CCAP Nkhoma Synod in addressing the threat of encroaching consumerism within the context of the ecological crisis?

First of all, as was seen, the Chewa believes that *chipande chatherere chimakoma mkuyenderana* (members of a community must benefit from each other). In the original Chewa

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<sup>48</sup> An case in point of this was seen in Malawi when burly tobacco licenses were issued to leading farmers in Malawi in late 1970s and 1980s and many of them prospered and immediately changed their lifestyles. Competition increased and some fell into debt. Cases were reported of the new rich committed suicide because they could not attain or maintain the level of wealth they had hoped for. This is precisely what Conradie calls the “psychological form of cancer” that results from a rampant consumer culture.

culture of solidarity, it is frowned upon if one wants more than his or her fellows. If a person displays more drive and ambition than the other members of the group, it is often translated as wanting to be a successful at other people's expense. In fact, according to Breugel (2001:261), such a person may be taken as a *mfiti*, (a witch) using *chizimba* (magic powers) to accumulate such wealth. Though frowned upon from a Western perspective and undeniably susceptible for abuse and injustice, this attitude is a sign of the importance of economic equality among the Chewa.

Among the Chewa there is also the view that *awa chuma chawo chawatayitsa chikhalidwe chathu cha umunthu* (a person had abandoned his/her culture and tradition because of his/her riches). There is thus a cultural sensitivity for the possibility of depersonalising others for the sake of an affluent lifestyle. Clearly this resonates with the gospel demands for love, equality and justice, which in turn, in ecotheological terms, may translate into ways of behaving that are in line with a responsible and equitable use of limited resources for the good of the whole of society.

As was seen in Chapter Four, there are many elements of communal life in traditional Chewa culture. Togetherness is the order of the day in village life. This is evidenced by shared tasks such as *dima* (ploughing together), weeding, harvesting, threshing and winnowing of grain, funeral sermons as well as when a member of a community falls ill. In Chewa culture there is a saying that *patsepatse mkulanda* (when you give out, something will be given to you unexpectedly). As was seen, eating together and sharing food is a common cultural practice among the Chewa where all would gather under a big tree in the village. At the *chidyerano* similar food is eaten by those present despite differences in financial or social status. Widows, orphans and other vulnerable members of the community are included, stories and traditional wisdom are shared and communal bonds are strengthened that are in strong contrast to the individualist emphasis of the consumer lifestyle.

The philosophy of *umunthu* is possibly one of the strongest anti-individualist traits of Chewa culture and it also extends to strangers. Hospitality is shown when a family expects a visitor and many surrounding families get involved in hosting visitors till the day of the latter's departure. When an unexpected visitor shows up, that visitor is taken to the chief of the village and the chief cares for the visitor, but with the help of different families in the community (cf. Mnyaka and Motlhabi, 2005:215-237).

With regard to spiritual or theological solutions to the challenge of consumerism, it was shown how Conradie (2010c:20) argues for humanity undergoing, in a most radical way, an inner change of heart that may lead to a change in lifestyle and sustainable patterns of consumption and production. A genuine conversion in Christ will, he says, enable people to change the way of think and act. With a converted heart, frugality and simplicity (Conradie 2010c:82) will follow much easier. This life will be necessary for justice towards and sustainability for the sake of future generations and those in need by living within the carrying capacity of planet earth. With converted hearts frugality will be kept in balance with love, justice and sustainability.

Chewa cultural values and expressions of oneness, togetherness and simplicity of life should inform the Church in its efforts to reduce the threat of consumerism and to promote a sharing culture which is much more in line with the Christian gospel. On top of depending on worship services, the church also depends on practices of congregations. Renewed emphasis should be placed on the communal nature of the Body of Christ and its practices and rituals. The sharing of the Eucharist/Communion, should for example lead congregants to realise the importance of sharing meals with the less fortunate in society. This spirit of sharing is what makes the congregation stand out as a witness to Christ in the world, thereby making the world feel the presence of Christ. In this way faith and culture may together, as was seen in Chapter Four, witness to the world, “witness to the consumer culture”, critique it and transform it.

## **5.5 Conclusion: Revisiting the research question and the way ahead:**

In Chapter One of this study, it set out to answer the question:

*With reference to the ecotheological thought of Ernst Conradie, do the challenges of the global ecological crisis, especially as it manifests itself in Malawian, imply any ecological responsibilities for the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod and how may an the formulation of an own ecotheology within the Synod resonate and thus be supported by cultural perspectives, values and practices of the Chewa culture?*

Chapter Two focused on the question of what is meant by the phrase “the ecological/environmental crisis”, what are the different elements and causes of this crisis and how and to what extent does it impact on Malawi? It was shown that globally, the crisis has

many different faces and that it threatens both humanity and nature and that the causes are natural but, in the context of the current crisis, mostly human-made. Some of the major manifestations of the crisis were identified and it was also indicated that Malawian manifestations of the crisis have already had significant negative consequences for a variety of spheres of life (human and non-human). Reference was also made to the fact that the disastrous economic effects of the ecological crisis are made worst in Malawi as one of the poorest countries in the world.

Chapter Three started with the question of what “ecothology” is, and what can be described as “Ernst M. Conradie’s ecotheology” and its point of departure that the ecological crisis is in the first instance a spiritual and cultural crisis. The reflection on the thought of Conradie included his understanding of the term “church” as the locus of ecotheological reflection and action. According to Conradie, theologically the church does not only have the duty to respond to the ecological crisis, but it also has the capability to influence the discourse on the environment at different levels of its existence. Conradie’s ecotheological emphases were identified and after explaining what the major manifestations and consequences and the theological response to these are from Conradie’s perspective the focus shifted. Consumer culture (for Conradie, the root cause of the ecological crisis), Conradie’s theological critique of it, possible theological responses and the unique resources available to the church formed the rest of the discussion of this chapter.

In Chapter Four, in answer to the research question of what the possible role of cultural values and practices may be in an ecotheology, specifically with reference to Chewa culture, this study first had to define exactly what may be understood under the term “culture” and what constitutes Chewa culture. The discussion began with a description of the traditional Chewa worldview as reflected, amongst others, by the Kaphirintiwa creation and fall narratives. Not only these narratives were explained, but also other traditional cultural practices and values such as those relating to agriculture and the land, ownership, to animals and plants and the Chewa philosophy of *umunthu* - with reference to family and village life, age, rituals, et cetera. The question of a possible relationship between theology/faith and culture was then answered with reference to the classic work by North American Christian ethicist of the previous century Richard Niebuhr. A possible formulation of this relationship, in addition to Niebuhr’s five



paradigms, was suggested with reference to Allbee's paradigm of "Christ-Witnessing-to-Culture".

In the current chapter (Five), the question was again posed whether an ecotheology may be informed by cultural values and practices. As in Chapter Three, this final chapter again departed from Conradie's conviction that the church as the Body of Christ represented at all levels of society by its members has the capacity and responsibility to theologically address social issues. It then followed the major ecotheological principles that Conradie uses also applies it to existing theological convictions within the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod, but also to Chewa cultural values and practices that resonate with these principles to show that the Synod may also build on these Chewa cultural values in creating an effective ecological awareness amongst its members and pastors and in formulating an ecotheological response to the current crisis.

Finally, as have been now reiterated time and again, according to Conradie, consumerism is a universal root cause of the ecological crisis. It was seen that both biblical and cultural principles should alert people when enough is enough and that there are things that are more important than individual satisfaction, comfort, personal wealth and consumption. But where and how may the Nkhoma Synod do this?

It was established that in the developed countries the problem is not so much a lack of information and planning and it is not a problem of understanding how the crisis occurred, but why and what its end results will be (Conradie 2010c:19). It was noted that in the Nkhoma Synod there is both a lack of information, planning and understanding with regard to the how the crisis occurred and why, as well as what its end results may be. Therefore, the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod, its clergy and laity all need ecological and ecotheological information with regard to how they use their natural resources in how they live and work, and in how they respond or may respond to the encroaching threat of consumerism in Malawi. How can a person after all change his or her views and repent without knowledge of what was done wrong and how to address it? As such ecotheological themes need to be incorporated into the curricula of pastors' training institutions of the Synod. In fact, it should become part of every theological discipline taught to the new generation of pastors. This should however also be part of the in-service training of the serving pastors. Only then the theology of ecology might have impact on the Synod as a whole.

Conradie (2000:40) has indicated the church needs to help its members to realise that destroying nature is a sin. Many of the basic Christian convictions that Conradie speaks of



already exist in the theology (and standards of faith), liturgy, practices and rituals of the C.C.A.P Nkhoma Synod, but these convictions are seldom brought into conversation with the ecological crisis in Malawi. At the same time, in as much as there exists a relationship between theology and culture, the C.C.A.P. also has the responsibility to witness to cultural practices that are *detrimental* to the environment (such as bush burning to which was referred in Chapter Four).

The yearly annual general meetings of the elders, the youth guild, the women's guild and men's guild held in the Church's fifteen presbyteries are some of the forums for ecotheological knowledge dissemination. Furthermore, it takes two or more years for a person (usually a young person) to finish catechism classes. The culture of teaching girls and boys at initiation ceremonies, which Nkhoma Synod has already borrowed from Chewa culture, should be utilised in transferring ecological messages to the youth. This culture of receiving moral instruction and learning practices upon becoming an adult member of society may also be utilised by Nkhoma Synod for environmental conscientisation. The seriousness that Nkhoma Synod shows toward *chilangizo* (moral instructions) (Msangaambe 2011:65) should also play a role. After finishing catechism, boys and girls are asked to attend *chilangizo* until they are married. These forums are ideal places to spread ecotheological messages of stewardship, service, caretaking, custodian- and guardianship.

Another place where the ecotheological message of the Synod may be spread is via the liturgy and one part of the liturgy is music – a cornerstone of most African cultures. It was mentioned in Chapter Four that Chewa are born musicians and dancers. Historically, music formed part of everyday activities and was incorporated in whatever activity the Chewa were doing. Therefore music can be a medium for the spread of ecotheological messages. This is especially true in light of Katani's (2008:119) view that songs among the Chewa already contain moral teaching, explain moral behavior, and demonstrate origins of or justify societal hardships. It is also here where space and opportunities for lament, for confessing complicity for ecotheological degradation, for asking for forgiveness for this and for the deep conversion of heart and mind of the faith community may take place. As the Church is also the individual members of in their day to day lives, the Church through its worship and ministries should bring its ecotheological reflections to bear on individual behaviour, on creating the consciousness among individual church members of the extent of their own ecological footprints in their lives in society, in business, at work, and in civil society. At national or international level, too, the

church in its ecumenical manifestations should create an ecological consciousness and should promote and partake in actions to address the ecological crisis.

In summary, this study showed that in light of the current global ecological crisis, the C.C.A.P. Nkhoma Synod on theological and scriptural grounds has a responsibility toward the natural environment. In responding to this responsibility, it may and should also take into account its members' rich cultural heritage as a people living close to nature and in many cases living off the land in an effort to avert the escalation of the current ecological crisis with a view to leaving a legacy for future generations.

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